II
Tearmoon Empire
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Characters

Tearmoon Empire

Mia

Protagonist. The sole princess of the Empire. Ex-selfish brat. Actually a coward. A revolution leads to her execution, but she somehow leaps back through time and wakes up a twelve-year-old again. With her diary from her previous life in hand, she tries everything she can to avoid a repeat encounter with the guillotine.

Archnemesis

Revolution

Archnemesis

Outcount Rudolvon's Family

Tiona

The eldest daughter of Outcount Rudolvon. In the previous timeline, she led the revolutionary army and was revered as the Saint of the Empire. Now, she is Mia's classmate and looks up to her.

Cyril

Tiona's younger brother. Super smart.

Ludwig

Young, motivated government official. Sharp tongue. He was about to be transferred to the middle of nowhere, but Mia stepped in and saved his career. He believes Mia to be a great leader bestowed upon him by the heavens.

Lulu Tribe

Liora

Tiona's maid-in-waiting. She is from a tribe that lives in the Sealence Forest.

Anne

Mia's maid-in-waiting. Born into a poor family of merchants. She helped Mia in her previous life and is now a devout Mia fanatic.

Dion

The captain of a hundred-man squad. The strongest knight in the Empire. In the previous timeline, he was Mia's executioner.

[Forkroad & Co.]

Chloe

The only daughter of Forkroad & Co., whose business spans multiple kingdoms. She is Mia's classmate and book buddy.

※ ..... Relationship from the previous timeline

Kingdom of Sunkland

Keithwood

Prince Sion's attendant.
A cynic. But a competent one.

Sion

Assistance

Crown Prince. All-round genius. In the previous timeline, he was Mia's archnemesis, helping Tiona and eventually becoming known as the Penal King. Now, he accepts that Mia is the Great Sage of the Empire.

[Wind Crows] Sunkland's intelligence service.

[White Crows] A team within the Wind Crows formed for a certain project.

Kingdom of Remno

Abel

Second Prince. In the previous timeline, he was known to be an extraordinary playboy. Now, as a result of meeting Mia, he is starting to diligently improve his swordsmanship instead.

[Revolutionary Army]

Lynsha
The daughter of a family of fallen nobles and a member of the revolutionary army.

Lambert
Lynsha's older brother and the leader of the revolutionary army.

Chancellor Dasayev Donovan
A sensible Count who voiced his opposition to the King's policy.

Holy Principality of Belluga

Support

Rafina

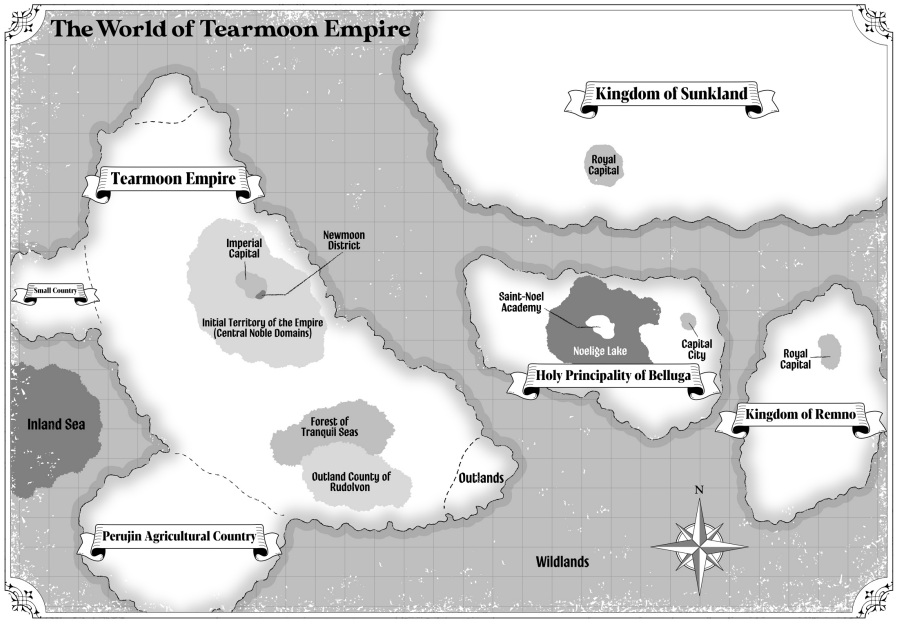
The Duke's daughter. Saint-Noel Academy's student council president and the school's de facto decision maker. In the previous timeline, she supported Sion and Tiona from behind the scenes. Her smile can be lethal.

[Saint-Noel Academy]

A super elite school attended by all the highborn children of neighboring nations.

Story

Mia, the reviled Selfish Princess of the fallen Tearmoon Empire is executed, only to wake up as a twelve-year-old after somehow leaping backwards through time. With a second chance at life, she resolves to fix the ills that plague the Empire so she doesn't end up at the guillotine again. After seeking out those who remained loyal to her in the previous timeline and receiving their support, she begins her attempts at financial reform. After enrolling in Saint-Noel Academy, she approaches a potential fiancé — Abel, the Second Prince of a neighboring kingdom — only to unwittingly win the friendship of fellow classmates and ex-archenemies, including Tiona the poor noble and Sion the Crown Prince of Sunkland.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Kingdom of Sunkland
Royal Capital
Tearmoon Empire
Imperial Capital
Newmoon District
Small Country
Initial Territory of the Empire (Central Noble Domains)
Saint-Noel Academy
Noeliğe Lake
Capital City
Royal Capital
Holy Principality of Belluga
Kingdom of Remno
Inland Sea
Forest of Tranquil Seas
Outland County of Rudolvon
Outlands
N
Perujin Agricultural Country
Wildlands

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Chapter 1: An Eerie Premonition

Saint-Noel Academy was closing for the summer holidays, and many students had begun their journeys home. Mia was no exception. She was currently sitting in her carriage as it made its bumpy way toward Tearmoon. On the road and with time to spare, she decided to take out her blood-stained diary and revisit its contents. It had been a long time since she'd touched the book, and as she flipped it open she held onto the hope that its final pages would reveal a different future.

"Well, that's... not surprising, I suppose."

She leaned back in her seat and let out a discouraged sigh. The diary still concluded with her execution at the guillotine, and the overarching structure of her story remained the same. There was a famine, followed by a revolution, which sealed the fate of the imperial line. Of course, there were some changes. Whereas the masses had been uniformly critical of the imperial family in the previous timeline, the updated diary described the rise of a voluntary militia composed mostly of residents from the Newmoon District. Their loyalty lay not with the imperial family as a whole but with Mia herself, and they came directly to her aid. While their numbers were small, they fought in concert with the imperial guards and dealt some significant blows to the revolutionary army. Furthermore, there were a considerable number of people in Tearmoon who called for Mia to be spared. Though the degree to which these voices mattered was unclear, the circumstances of Mia's captivity did indeed see some improvement. Rather than an underground dungeon cell, she was held in a room in the castle and, at the head chef's kind plea, was supplied with reasonable food for her meals. The day before her execution, they even cooked her a feast for her final dinner, as evidenced by an entry in her diary that specifically described the event. She'd taken care to mention that the ambermoon tomato stew was a particularly exquisite piece of work. That alone attested to its quality.

There was also Sion, whose attitude had changed as well. At the

behest of his attendant, he added his own voice to those opposing Mia's execution.

On the other hand, her actions had caused some things to turn out for the worse. Anne, for example, suffered a far more tragic fate. A bold but failed attempt to rescue Mia resulted in the breakup of her family and with Anne herself being arrested as a criminal. Then there was Abel, who mounted his own daring rescue. Moving covertly, he managed to infiltrate Tearmoon's border, only to be discovered before he reached Mia. He fought his captors tooth and nail, carving a bloody path toward the castle before expiring on its very steps. In his wake was the grisly sight of the countless bodies that had stood in his way. As a result, relations with the Kingdom of Remno suffered, plunging Tearmoon into even further hardship.

"That... certainly wasn't an enjoyable read."

The sentences describing the news of Abel's death were written in a weak, unsteady script that betrayed the writer's shock. Many of the words on the page were smeared, suggesting that they had gotten wet. Sweat, perhaps, from dread of the event's implications. Or maybe...

Despite these subtle differences, however, her end remained the same.

The famine seems like it's not as bad as before, but...

It looked like food shortage was still the primary cause of the revolution. The food she'd instructed Ludwig to stockpile had provided some relief, but it couldn't stop the famine from occurring. Ultimately, they still wouldn't save up enough food.

And then there's the conflict with the minority tribe near the border.

The diary described a regional conflict with the Lulus, a tribe of sylvan people. This might have happened in the previous timeline as well, but Mia had almost no recollection of it. At the time she'd had no interest in the issue, so she still had no idea what had caused it. What she now understood, however, was why it had led to bad things for her.

The Lulus... Tiona's attendant came from that tribe.

Liora Lulu, as her name suggests, was born into the Lulu people. If something awful happened to her tribe, and Mia happened to be implicated in it, it was no stretch to imagine that Tiona would hate her for it. In fact, the diary even spelled out that this event was what fractured their relationship. On the other hand, it suggested that if Mia was able to do something about this one issue, she could

maybe avoid turning Tiona into her enemy.

I have to admit, all those crops the Rudolvons produce are looking pretty appealing. If I could somehow get on their good side and convince them to fork over some food, it'll do wonders for the impending shortage.

That supply alone wasn't going to solve the famine, but it could significantly improve their situation.

Anyway, moving on... Hm, this part intrigues me too.

Mia's eyes were drawn to the section describing the event that triggered the revolution — the abduction of Outland Count Rudolvon. According to the diary, seeing that his people were starving, the outcount gave out his own stores to feed them. The subsequent surge in his popularity vexed the emperor, who ordered the outcount's abduction in a fit of envy. This angered the masses, who rose up in protest, thereby sparking the flames of revolution.

This incident was unchanged from the previous timeline, but Mia couldn't shake the feeling that something seemed... off. Admittedly, her father the emperor was no saint, and the questionable dealings of cash and coin that so often accompanied high office could surely be traced back to him as frequently as any other noble. However, she had some serious doubts about whether he would be *that* envious of some noble who happened to get popular.

I just can't imagine Father caring about something like that. The only thing he's interested in is trying to get me to think he's cool.

He'd go as far as to start a war if his darling daughter asked him to do so, but he was otherwise a rather innocuous man. Granted, the degree to which he catered to her bordered on lunacy and she really wished he'd cut it out sometimes, but that was a princess problem. Mostly, he was just a harmless fellow who didn't do much. Which, considering the crown on his head, was arguably a pretty big problem, but at least he wasn't an actively bad person. An annoying one, perhaps, but not a malevolent one.

Something about this incident doesn't feel right... It doesn't seem like something Father would do.

She tried to keep reading, but doubt lingered in her mind. It clung to her thoughts like tar, dark and viscous and utterly unpleasant. It sank down slowly, oozing past her chest and into the pit of her stomach, where it congealed into a sense of deep uneasiness. It was as if it were all intentional... As if someone had fabricated this incident to purposefully incite revolution... Or

indeed, as if it were willed by God, and the invisible hand of fate were pushing the empire toward its ruin. The ominous premonition churned uncomfortably in her stomach before rising up into her throat. This dreadful sensation defied description, but if one had to put words to it...

"Ugh... I feel sick..."

...It would be cartsickness. Indeed, all that reading she'd been doing in the bobbing carriage had made her feel terribly nauseated.

"A-Anne... Ugh... Anne... I feel sick..." she whimpered as she sought the help of her loyal maid, who was currently sitting out in the driver's box because Mia had requested some alone time to read her diary.

Anne soon appeared at the carriage door, where she discovered a teary-eyed Mia who'd rolled herself up into a ball on her seat. The sight was utterly incongruous with the image of the wise princess who was so respected by her peers at Saint-Noel. Fortunately, they weren't there to see.

Chapter 2: Princess Mia… Reaches Peak Mental Performance

Five days had passed since Mia's return to the empire.

"…I'm exhausted."

From the endless rounds of greetings she had to exchange with her father and his higher-ranking nobles to the commemorative party she'd had to attend upon her return, she'd been swamped since arriving back in Tearmoon. Princesses of mighty empires did not, in fact, spend their days idle. They were busy people.

"I already miss school. It was so relaxing there."

She'd barely been here a week, and already she wanted to go back. Just as she was fondly recalling her carefree days in Saint-Noel, her loyal subject Ludwig appeared before her.

"It brings me great pleasure to welcome you back, Your Highness, and I am overjoyed to see that you have returned safely," he said, his face expressing none of the emotions he referred to. The hint of a scowl he wore was a familiar sight — so much so that it almost felt nostalgic.

"I, too, am glad to see you well, Ludwig."

After a quick exchange of greetings, Ludwig began to brief Mia on the developments that had occurred in the empire during her absence.

"It's still not enough…" she said with a sigh after he finished his report.

"I agree that the food reserves are less than ideal, but, Your Highness, I must stress that further stockpiling of grains poses a significant risk of wastage."

Mia's concern over the empire's provisions was one thing that Ludwig simply couldn't comprehend. The quantity she'd instructed him to stockpile was so great that it would only make sense if they were preparing for a famine the scale and severity of which the empire had never seen before. There would be enough food to keep Tearmoon fed even if harvests were completely decimated for years.

No matter how he thought about it, this seemed excessive. If anything, financial collapse seemed like a far more realistic and pressing concern. After all, maintaining provisions was the process of keeping crops in storage, where they'd remain unused. If nothing happened, then the money spent on their production would have gone to waste. Furthermore, upkeep wasn't free; it cost money to keep food stored.

These were issues that Mia couldn't be unaware of, and yet, she still maintained her stance.

"Your Highness, let me first say that I trust you and I have faith in your judgment. Therefore, while I cannot profess support for your position, should you wish for increased provisions, then I shall see to it that they are increased. However, we will still need a way to explain this decision to the nobles."

"What do you mean?"

"I have already given official notice that all Tearmoon nobles are to curb spending and reduce waste. To then declare that we are increasing stored provisions may very well invite criticism that you yourself are causing waste."

"You raise a good point. They certainly are experts at finding fault in others."

From Mia's viewpoint, increasing provisions was obviously the right thing to do. After all, she knew for certain that a widespread famine was going to happen in a few years. The frustrating part was that despite knowing they didn't have enough food stocked up, she had no way of explaining why they needed more. She sighed.

"It seems like we need to change our angle of approach," she said, quickly shaking her head as though she were clearing her thoughts. "Ludwig, you said that you trust me, right? If so, then please proceed under the assumption that there will be a serious famine in a few years time."

His eyes narrowed at her statement.

"Do you mean to say that I am to prepare not for a possible famine, but an *inevitable* one?"

"Correct. And assuming there will be a famine, I have another question for you. If we can't save up enough food by the time it strikes, then what should we do?"

"Well, normally, we'd have no choice but to use merchants to bring food in from afar."

Even Mia knew that much, but...

“That won’t do. Using merchants to that extent would ruin our finances. Nothing is as expensive as food during a famine, correct?”

“There’s little we can do about that. Price increases when demand outstrips supply. It’s natural for something to cost more when more people want it.”

“We have to limit that, though…”

Or they’d reach a point where a bag of wheat could purchase an entire castle. She knew this was possible; she’d lived it. And it had been hell.

The only way to avoid getting taken advantage of by merchants is to stockpile more food, but…

That wasn’t an option. At the same time, the chances of increasing supply was similarly slim. Almost all the crops here were going to be wiped out completely. They could increase the amount of farmland in Tearmoon by ten, and it still wouldn’t be enough. It would also be extremely inefficient.

Hmph! This is all so terribly unfair! It’s not like all the food in the whole world is gone!

Now, to what might be the surprise of some, Mia did not, in fact, spend all her days at school lazing around. Sure, friends and romance had occupied a good deal of her time, but she did actually get some learning done as well. One day, when she was doing some research on famines, she realized that she’d misunderstood how it all worked.

Famines were not caused by a deficiency in the absolute quantity of food available. They occurred due to impediments in the transport of food. It wasn’t a supply problem; it was a distribution problem. People went hungry not because the food was gone, but because the food couldn’t get to them. That was why the business model of bringing food into areas of famine and selling it at a high price could exist in the first place…

“Ah! I’ve got it!” she said, leaping to her feet.

The sudden motion made Ludwig flinch, but she paid him no mind, for in a flash of inspiration she had just come up with a very good idea. If they could somehow purchase food from merchants at a low price during the famine, then all their problems would be solved. How could they do this, you ask? Why…

Mate’s rates! It’s all about mate’s rates!

Mia’s very good idea was basically just being a sleazy friend and asking for discounts — hardly something that required a muse

of fire to think up.

"Mate's rates, you say... I see..."

For some reason, though, Ludwig fell silent as he contemplated her words. After a while, he looked up and in a voice filled with admiration said, "That's... a brilliant idea."

Chapter 3: Talking Business

Chloe's father, Marco Forkroad, was a capable merchant who'd started his business from scratch and built it into a vast company. With his sharp business acumen and level-headed judgment, he was a prominent and respected figure among his fellow merchants. Despite his impressive accomplishments as a merchant, however, he'd chosen to send his daughter to Saint-Noel Academy instead of training her to take over the family business. His reasoning was simple: he wanted his daughter to have the best possible future. He'd wanted her to be educated in the best teaching environment the continent had to offer, and — being well aware of her shyness — had hoped she'd make some friends there as well. Of course, if said friends *just so happened* to be members of the gentry, then all the better. He was, after all, a consummate businessman and he wasn't above getting chummy with a few wealthy nobles through his daughter's connections.

That was how merchants functioned. They had a keen eye for profit, they never passed up an opportunity to make money, and they operated under the principle: "All is fish that comes to the net." For him, a business negotiation was a battle of wits where each side tried everything they could to maximize their gains. There was always a winner and a loser. Having lived in the world of commerce for most of his life, his motto was: "Take advantage of every opportunity that presents itself, and make everything into an opportunity."

Yet, even he hadn't expected his daughter to befriend the princess of a vast empire.

My dear daughter, becoming friends with the princess is nice and all, but next time... Maybe try for someone a little less heart attack inducing...

Despite his reservations, he'd nevertheless decided to pay a visit to Tearmoon. For one, to pass up such a sudden stroke of good fortune ran counter to his merchant's motto. More importantly, though, he wanted a chance to meet the first friend his daughter

had ever made. It just so happened that he had a deal to close nearby too, so the timing worked out perfectly. After submitting a request for an audience with Princess Mia, he'd proceeded to look for lodging nearby, figuring someone known as the Great Sage of the empire would doubtless be a very busy person and require him to wait a while for her response. Instead...

So much for waiting... Marco thought as he stepped into the audience chamber. *I was prepared to hunker down for a good fortnight or so. Who'd have thought she'd agree to see me almost immediately?*

He regarded the young girl before him, taking in the cheerful smile she wore and — just as Chloe had mentioned — the sparks of intelligence in her eyes. Slowly but surely, it began to sink in that he was looking at Mia Luna Tearmoon, the Princess of the Tearmoon Empire.

"I am most honored to have been granted an audience with you, Your Highness," he said in a tone of utmost respect. "I am Chloe's father, Marco Forkroad. I am the owner of a merchant company, but I have been granted the title of Knight."

"Welcome, Sir Marco Forkroad. It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance. I hope Chloe is doing well?"

"Very well, yes. She speaks fondly of your kindness and consideration..."

They exchanged a few more pleasantries before Mia fell into a contemplative silence. Then she said in a quiet voice, "By the way, Sir Marco, I have a question for you. Would it be possible for you to ferry some goods from across the sea?"

"Huh? Oh, why yes, it's certainly possible. My company owns a great many merchant ships. Should you have need of them, we'd be happy to assist you..." Sensing that a business opportunity was afoot, Marco put on his best salesman smile. "What kind of goods does Your Highness have in mind? Spices, perhaps? Or some exotic rugs? The ones from overseas are of excellent quality and quite popular amongst the empire's nobility—"

"I want wheat."

"Huh?"

He stared at Mia for a while, trying to comprehend the words that had just come out of her mouth. She was asking him to ferry wheat into Tearmoon from across the sea. To a merchant, the idea seemed nothing short of ludicrous. Why ferry wheat from overseas when it was *right there*? Both the empire and its neighboring

kingdoms grew their own wheat. There was no need, never mind any discernible benefit, to put it on a boat and transporting it across a long distance.

Business in a nutshell was about buying from places that had things and going to places that didn't have those things to sell them at a higher price. If there was a famine or something, he might stand to turn a profit from a boatload of foreign wheat, but there was no way he was going to make money that way during normal times. He doubted he could even recoup the shipping costs. After all, who was going to pay extra for wheat? They could just go buy it from their local store. It wasn't like foreign wheat had any special properties, and it seemed unlikely that a trip across the sea was going to make it taste any better.

The idea was bizarre enough as-is, but Mia proceeded to add an addendum to her proposal that made his eyes widen further.

"Also, there is one condition: the price must be decided beforehand with a guarantee to honor it, no matter what happens after."

"By which, you mean..."

"Even if a famine occurs, increases to the price will not be permitted."

"That's—"

The princess's proposal was as baffling as it was outrageous. The addition of such a condition to the deal would mean there was nothing in it for his company. While he could see that the empire would stand to gain by securing a stable source of food in the case of a famine, Forkroad & Co. would derive no benefit from the arrangement.

That's so ridiculously one-sided—

Marco paused, his train of thought interrupted by a sudden recollection of how his daughter had spoken of Mia. Chloe's voice echoed in his mind, describing the princess as a person who would never use her power to force others to do things her way. If that was the case, then there had to be some deeper meaning behind her ostensibly unreasonable proposal...

Is this... a test? Am I being tested?

A chill ran up his spine and he felt a drop of cold sweat roll down his back. It'd been so subtle — insidious, almost — that he hadn't realized what the princess was pulling him into until he already had one foot through the metaphorical door. But now he

knew, and he could feel the familiar tension in the air that had previously eluded him. This was the negotiation table, and they were talking business.

There's more to this, there has to be. And the question now is whether or not I can figure out what it is. This is how she's going to decide if I'm someone worth doing business with.

He needed to think. What was it about this proposal that would make him want to sign on? What hidden boon did it offer? Just then, he heard Mia's voice.

"Oh, I forgot to mention..." she said in a tone that sounded suspiciously like one employed by a teacher in the presence of a slightly slow pupil, "I will always purchase at least a minimum amount agreed upon in advance."

Fixed purchases at a fixed price... and the price would remain unchanged no matter what happened, famine or...

No famine. Which means...

Marco turned over the puzzle of Mia's proposal in his mind, twisting and turning it along with the hints she'd offered until the pieces all clicked together and he arrived at a conclusion.

It'll be a product that... isn't affected by market fluctuations?

He turned the idea over a few times and evaluated its pros and cons — the same way he always did when faced with a new proposition. As a merchant, the process was by now second nature. The mental thunderclap of shock that followed, however, was considerably less routine.

"If I am to transport it from overseas," he said after collecting his thoughts. "I will have to set the price higher than is usual. Has Your Highness considered this issue?"

He thought he'd figured out what the princess had in mind, but he wanted confirmation. Her answer to this question would provide just that. Mia didn't respond, though. Instead, the young official standing behind her walked over and handed him a piece of parchment.

"These are the details of the contract," said Ludwig.

Marco read through its contents and let out a pensive sigh.

This is... a fascinating price point, he thought as he mused over the implications.

Mia, meanwhile, was bubbling with satisfaction over getting to buy her wheat for cheap. Indeed, she'd offered what she thought was a very good price — for her, that is. Unbeknownst to Mia,

however, her definition of “cheap” was horribly skewed compared to most people. After all, her point of reference was the famine itself, during which prices had gone crazy and a bag of wheat had been worth a castle.

So what did her price look like to a normal pair of eyes, then?

Even factoring in the transportation costs incurred by long distances, this is still on the higher side of things. With a price like this, as long as my expenses don’t go through the roof unexpectedly, I’ll be making a steady profit.

Marco understood Mia’s proposal to be a mutually-beneficial arrangement. In exchange for paying him a premium when things were fine, he would help her out during times of hardship. She was, in essence, presenting an arrangement very similar in concept to something that had yet to exist in this world: insurance.

But wait... There’s still more to it...

The gears of his capable merchant mind continued to turn, and he happened upon another important corollary of this proposal. It was, in fact, the most significant merit to taking part in Mia’s plan... He realized that it would lead to the continued maintenance of supply chains.

Consider the following question: why does the price of food rise during famines to begin with? Of course, the imbalance between supply and demand was a factor, but even if its effects were removed, the price of wheat would still have to go up. Why? Because the cost of acquiring it goes up.

Suppose he tried to import wheat from overseas. Having never traded in wheat before, Forkroad & Co. would have to start by actually finding and talking to foreign wheat farmers. Then they’d have to figure out how to move the wheat. What kind of vessels were necessary? What did they have to watch out for during transport? Maybe wheat wouldn’t be too complicated to handle, but getting bags of it safely across the sea still required plenty of know-how. They’d have to hire people with knowledge and experience. Building a supply chain from the ground up was a costly task. It took a significant commitment of both money and energy to create a flow of goods where there had been none before.

Now, what if there already was one? What if... a previously established flow of goods, however paltry it might be, still remained? Surely it would be easier to widen a small stream than to revive a dry one?

If I can maintain the distribution channels... If I can just keep things flowing... then whenever a famine strikes, I'll be able to bring in shipments of food faster, smoother, and at a lower cost than anyone else.

The barrier to maintaining those distribution channels was, again, cost. A business model that only profited during times of famine was irrational to sustain. Anyone looking to make money would — with very good reason — choose to abandon these channels during times of good harvest.

And what Princess Mia is proposing... is that she'll foot the bill for that overhead cost.

It was a distribution system that provided a two-way guarantee: Forkroad profited when times were good, and his company guaranteed a supply of food to the empire when times were bad. Furthermore, even after delivering on its promise to the empire, the system would still be able to sell food to needy areas earlier than rival companies.

By God... She's building a system to protect her people from famine while simultaneously ensuring that her negotiating partner benefits as well... What in the...

Despite her short stature, Marco couldn't help but feel like he stood in the presence of a giant. For a time he stared at the princess, his gaze infused with a deep sense of awe.

Chloe... My dear daughter, who in the world is this princess you have befriended?

A long, poignant sigh escaped his lips, and he lowered his head.

"Forkroad & Co. accepts the listed conditions and would be honored to enter into this contract with Your Highness."

The young princess beamed at him in response.

Truly, Her Highness's genius knows no bounds...

Ludwig glanced from the bowing Marco to Mia, pondering what further goals she had in mind. When she'd mentioned "mate's rates," it was as if she'd lit for him a fire in the darkness. He saw what she saw and understood the true meaning behind her words.

By lowering herself... By effectively staining her own image, she gave the gentry a motive they could live with.

Telling nobles to reduce wasteful spending so "people don't go hungry" was going to result in nothing but vehement opposition. Ideals meant nothing to these people. They couldn't care less about the death and suffering of the masses. The gentry had no interest nor desire in pursuing a selfless cause; high-minded principles weren't going to be well-received by their ilk.

What if, however, it was framed as a form of nepotism? That this was all about helping out a friend? That was something these people understood very well. They partook in such activities constantly. Of course, their opinions of the princess were not going to improve after seeing her engage in the exact kind of unscrupulous dealings she'd been faulting them for, but that level of hypocrisy would be tolerated as just the arrogance of the emperor and his kin. As a matter of fact, a certain amount of hypocritical selfishness from the imperial family was widely regarded by nobles as both normal and acceptable.

Wait, but this is Her Highness we're talking about... What if...

Although Ludwig was confident that he'd done good work while Mia had been away at school, he was nevertheless aware that he might have pulled on the reins a touch too hard. Was it not possible, then, that Mia shared his sentiment and sought to send the message that they were easing up a little? By actively engaging in a nepotistic act, she was demonstrating the degree to which she would tolerate cronyism and partiality.

Politics was about more than just waving the flag of virtue. Honesty alone was not going to get things done. There had to be carrots, and there had to be sticks, and each had to be used accordingly to keep the ass from throwing a tantrum.

The scope of her wisdom defies all reason... How much farther does she see? How many more moves does she have planned? Ludwig let out a trembling breath. *May I never need to glimpse the inner workings of*

her mind, lest its infinite complexity shatter my fragile psyche.

It hardly needs to be said, but if anything in Mia's mind was going to shatter his psyche, it was its sheer *emptiness*.

Chapter 4: The Unicorn Hairpin

A week after closing the deal with Chloe's father, Mia went to the Newmoon District to inspect the situation in the infamous slums of the imperial capital. The visit was Mia's own idea, and her sudden proposal had forced Ludwig to hastily put together a small escort of imperial guards. Having been pulled from their regular duties without any prior warning, a couple of the newer guards were grumbling to each other under their breath as they gathered for their assignment.

"I swear, Her Highness can be a real pain in the ass sometimes. Like, seriously, the slums? That place is a shithole. Why does she want to go there, of all places?"

"Yeah, I don't get what there is to see. Unless you just want to watch crime happen, of course. Oh, I guess she wants to go take a look at that hospital she built. Makes it seem less like a popularity stunt, probably. You have to give her some points for giving enough of a damn to actually bother. That's the Great Sage of the Empire for you."

Considering that heads would roll if anything happened to the princess, the guards would much rather have her stay in the castle and mind her own business. It was a lot easier to protect someone who didn't go looking for trouble. The complaining soldiers were admonished, however, by one of the veteran guards who'd accompanied Mia on her first trip to the Newmoon District.

"Hey, quit grumbling, you rookies. And show the princess some respect. I know what you think of them nobles, and you're not wrong, but Her Highness is... different. She's not like them. There'll be no badmouthing her under my watch, got it?"

The veteran guard turned and gazed off into the distance, remembering his first encounter with the princess. In her he saw the courage to step boldly toward wherever duty led, even if it meant entering places where crime ran rampant. He saw in her the compassion to help the children of the street, running her hand through their dirty hair and picking them up despite their sullied

clothes. And he saw in her the wisdom to build a hospital in a poor district that so desperately needed it. In other words, his opinion of Mia had suffered the same hyperinflation that Ludwig's had.

Then, as if on cue, Mia arrived on the scene.

"Good day everyone. I very much appreciate your timely arrival on such short notice."

She watched as the guards, who'd been caught slightly by surprise, rushed to arrange themselves and stand at attention. The sight of their orderly formation brought a warm smile to her lips. During the revolution, almost every last one of the imperial guards had stood with her until the bitter end. To this day, she remained rather fond of this loyal group of knights. Figuring it couldn't hurt to further strengthen their bond, she decided to reward them.

With a smile, of course. Money cost... well, money, and smiles were free.

Questionable motivations aside, her smile proved to be extremely effective at boosting morale, as evidenced by the newfound sparkle in the eyes of a number of the younger guards. After all, Mia was reasonably charming. Nobody was going to be writing songs about her peerless beauty for ages to come or anything, but between "passable" and "good-looking," three out of five assessors would probably consider her the latter. Plus, her status as the princess of a mighty empire might serve to bias their evaluations in her favor.

On top of that, she also happened to be wearing riding gear today, which featured a blouse worn over a pair of shorts. For the guards, whose image of noble fashion involved cumbersome dresses and way too much jewelry, Mia's sporty look was a breath of fresh air. Coupled with her friendly, disarming smile, it was hardly surprising that a few hearts were sent aflutter.

"Let us be on our way then."

"Y-Yes, Your Highness!"

Flanked by her extra peppy retinue of guards, Mia headed out of the castle.

"My, this place certainly feels a little different."

Immediately upon entering the district, Mia noticed that the atmosphere had changed. There were more people out on the streets and there seemed to be more smiles on the faces of passersby. The foul stench that had permeated the area had waned,

and the whole place just generally felt less... unwelcoming.

"The hospital is now in operation. I've also doubled their rations. There are fewer deaths in the streets. Slowly but surely, life is returning to the district."

Survival was at the top of everyone's priority list in life, and when it was threatened, everything else — like hygiene, for example — took a backseat. No one was going to bother with showering and laundry if they weren't sure whether they were going to live to see the next sunrise. Humans are a resilient lot, though, and while poverty had stalled their other priorities, it had not erased them. Funnily enough, as soon as death stopped looming on the horizon, people's attention immediately turned to the next items on the list, one of which was the cleanliness of their surroundings. At first, the staff members that had been assigned to the hospital were the only ones who had volunteered their time to clean the streets. Gradually, however, the practice began to spread to the locals. If the upward trajectory of the area continued, it could very well become an important district of Lunatear one day. Being part of the capital city, the land in the district was valuable and could be put to use in a variety of ways.

The imperial capital had no shortage of people, and comfortable, spacious places to stay were always at a premium. Ludwig, who'd seen the potential in the Newmoon District to alleviate this issue, had arranged for a new inn to be built at one end of the district and staffed it with local residents. By creating employment opportunities in the places that were stable enough, he got money flowing through the area. Once the inn was established, merchants would start flocking to it to build new businesses. Rather than leaving the gangrenous district to fester and die, he'd revitalized it with an infusion of capital into its circulation.

After listening to Ludwig's report, Mia nodded in satisfaction. "I see. That's most pleasing to hear."

Just then, they heard a voice from afar.

"Ah! Your Highness!"

They turned to find that it belonged to a young boy who had been playing in the streets with his friends. He jumped to his feet and ran toward them.

"Hey, kid! Stop right there!"

The guards tensed immediately, and a couple of them quickly flanked Mia, their hands on their sword hilts. Mia, though, regarded

the boy with a curious frown.

"Hm... Oh my, I remember. Aren't you the..."

She waved back the guards and looked the boy over. The last time she'd seen him he'd been lying in the street, all skin and bones and barely breathing. He was still a little on the scrawny side, but there was now at least *some* meat on his frame. His skin had a healthy tone, and his eyes glowed with life.

"Are you getting enough to eat these days?"

"Mmhm! Thanks to you, Your Highness!" the boy said with a sprightly nod. "Thank you!"

Then, he smiled, took something out of his pocket, and handed it to Mia.

"What might this be?"

"A present! Because you helped me!"

It was a white hairpin.

"My. How gracious of you. Hm..." She studied the hairpin, intrigued by how its surface had a prismatic luster that changed in color as she turned it in her hand. "What is it?"

"It's a unicorn hairpin!"

"A unicorn?! My!"

She held it up and stared, her eyes even wider than before. The way it glistened was indeed unlike anything she'd seen before. The more she looked at it, the more it seemed like it had been cut from the horn of one of the mythical steeds.

The boy watched her for a few seconds before breaking into a fit of giggles.

"It's made from a tree that grows in my hometown. Where I'm from, we call it a 'unicorn hairpin.'"

"Is it now?" She studied it for a little longer. "This really is quite lovely."

Delighted by the pin's unique beauty, she happily pushed it into her hair. Then, she turned to the boy and said with a smile, "Thank you. It's a wonderful present."

The boy's cheeks reddened, and he ran off without another word.

"It's his mother's keepsake, you know?"

"Hm?"

Mia turned to find the priest she'd met last time standing beside her. The man ran the only orphanage in the area.

"My, Father, how long it has been since we last met."

She curtsied politely using the lower hem of her shorts in place of a dress.

"Come, come. This way please," he said as he led her into the church.

Upon entering the priest's room, she found it was as frugally decorated as before and there was a general dearth of furniture.

"I'm very sorry that I can offer only such meager hospitality. You've been exceedingly generous in your support, but we've been so busy that we couldn't find the time to fix up the place," he said with an embarrassed grimace.

Mia looked around. The room was indeed unchanged. However, she remembered seeing a number of repairs done to the walls of the church and orphanage on her way here. Aesthetics notwithstanding, the buildings were certainly in much better shape. At the very least, they didn't have to worry about drafts anymore.

Leaving his own room for last, I see. It is so very like him to do that.

Not everyone who worked in the slums was of unimpeachable character. There were always people who came with the aim of filling their own coffers with the Empire's money. This priest was not one of those people. Despite receiving the relief funds that Ludwig had authorized, he remained committed to his stance of helping the disadvantaged. Faced with the Father's saintly integrity, Mia felt a wave of admiration rise up in her chest.

Before it sank back down with the exchange that followed.

"Ah, Your Highness," said the priest, as if he'd suddenly recalled something that had definitely not been on his mind previously. "I heard that you became friends with the Lady Saint..."

"Lady Saint? Oh, you mean Miss Rafina. Yes, we have indeed become friends."

Not that she'd ever meant to be... But she refrained from mentioning that.

I mean, she's just so scary... *Ughh...*

Meanwhile, Rafina seemed to have taken quite a liking to Mia and, despite being an object of utter terror for her, continued to write Mia letters during the summer holiday. It wasn't like Mia could just ignore them either, as social custom required her to write back.

Ugh, I hate this! It's so stressful! If I write something bad, it might make her hate me. And that would be a complete disaster!

The thought left her feeling miserable, and she sighed in

frustration. Conversely, the priest perked up.

"Really? Goodness! So the rumors are true!" he said, eyes sparkling with excitement.

For someone who belonged to the Central Orthodox Church, like him, Rafina was a literal idol. Hearing that Mia was friends with such a lofty icon of the church was understandably exciting, but...

Something didn't feel right.

Is it just me... or is that the reaction of an idol fan?

By which she meant not the idol of religious worship, but the kind that gets up on a stage and twirls around. She thought back to the time she went to the amphitheater to watch a show by a particularly popular actress. Something about the way a bunch of guests had crowded around her and kept flailing their arms up and down reminded her of the priest...

"Um, if it's not too much trouble, Your Highness, the next time you see her, could you... ask her for a signature?"

I was right, damn it! He is *a fan!*

The priest handed her a portrait of Rafina, which she accepted with a look of utter disgust, before giving her a bunch of detailed instructions such as how he'd like his own name to be included in the signature.

The portrait was one of many that had been commissioned in the Holy Principality of Belluga when Rafina was born. Mia could almost imagine the duke calling in a bunch of artists and having them all draw portraits of his newborn daughter, before gleefully handing them out to anyone and everyone who cared to receive them. After all, she was no stranger to overly affectionate fathers, and the duke's behavior was suspiciously reminiscent of how the emperor behaved around her.

Miss Rafina doesn't have it easy either, does she...

She felt a slight twinge of pity for the duke's daughter. Then she turned her attention back to the priest she'd lost all respect for, and pulled their conversation back from its *delightful* digression.

"Ahem. Now, Father, I believe you were saying something about how this hairpin was a keepsake?"

"Ah, yes, yes. Of course," replied the priest, who seemed like he'd been on the verge of launching into a passionate speech about why Rafina was the best and why everyone should love her. With a slow nod, he settled back down and reverted to the humble director

of the church and orphanage.

"That boy's mother was born into one of the small tribes that live in the forested regions near the empire's border. As I understand it, she met a man from another tribe and went on to have his child. This led to a fight between her and her parents. In the end, she took her newborn and left her home for the imperial capital. Unfortunately, the child grew sick at a young age and died shortly thereafter."

As soon as Mia heard the words "small tribes" and "near the empire's border," she felt a dreadful chill run up her spine. The portentous words of her diary resurfaced in her mind, and she knew with an instinctive certainty that she was already standing knee-deep in her own grave.

"...W-Would that small tribe happen to be known as the Lulus?"

"My goodness. I see that Your Highness was already aware..." said the priest. His look of surprise, however, was soon replaced by a nod of comprehension. "Ah, but of course. Your Highness is friends with the Lady Saint, after all. It would be natural to assume you've inquired already..."

The priest came to an assumptive but nevertheless favorable conclusion about Mia's competence. However, his membership in another fanclub ensured that his appreciation for her remained merely that of a casual supporter. The Mia fanclub would see no growth for now.

Moving on...

"My! Then this must mean so much to him! I can't accept something like this!" said Mia in a tone of exaggerated surprise to drive home the point that she definitely hadn't known what this was beforehand.

She stared at the hairpin, feeling a rising sense of unease at what kind of terrible future it might trigger. Her best bet was probably to give it back.

"Please keep it, Your Highness. The boy wishes very much for you to have it," the priest said with a gentle smile. "Ever since Your Highness brought him here, he has been wanting to repay your kindness. He'd mention it to me time and again. That hairpin is a token of his heartfelt appreciation."

Well, no duh! It's his mother's keepsake, for crying out loud! You don't have to spell it out for me!

"So please, Your Highness, I ask that you hold on to it. It may

be a simple item of little worth to you, but if at all possible, please don't throw it away..."

"D-Don't be ridiculous! Of course I won't throw it away! I'll take perfect care of it!"

Realizing that returning it was no longer an option, Mia chose the next best option.

"And if I may be so bold," continued the priest, "could I ask you to wear it when you visit us here? Even if it's only sometimes..."

"I'll wear it everyday!"

With her escape route cut off, she had no choice but to charge forward. Not only was she going to wear it, she was going to treasure it. And make it very obvious that she did so. If the boy was a critical actor in how this whole predicament was going to play out, then she was going to make sure he stayed on her side. She'd *sleep* with that hairpin on if that was what it took to win the boy's affection.

"Would you please let him know that his present was wonderful, and that I will treasure it very much?"

"I certainly will, Your Highness. I'm sure he'll be delighted to hear you liked his gift," replied the priest with a relieved smile.

Little did Mia know, however, that her actions that day would have significant consequences for events down the line.

Chapter 5: Mia Holds the Dice

There existed a jeweled box that was referred to as “Princess Mia’s Cursed Casket.” It was lined lavishly with a dazzling variety of precious gems and other valuable materials, all set carefully in intricate patterns. It was an item of great monetary and artistic value. It was also said to be cursed, having led every one of its many owners to ruin.

The original owner was no mystery; it’s in the name, after all. Ask anyone about the Cursed Casket, and they’ll tell you it first belonged to that notorious Princess of the Guillotine, Mia Luna Tearmoon. Ask who made it, however, and the answers begin to differ.

Few knew that the box had been made by Viscount Berman, a noble whose domain neighbored Tiona’s hometown, the Outland County of Rudolvon. Fewer still knew that it was the viscount whose actions had indirectly led to the empire’s downfall.

“Lord Berman, as expected, the Count of Rudolvon did not agree to our request.”

“Count? He’s an *outcount*, you fool! An *outland* count! Do not speak as if he were worthy of the title count!”

The viscount tsked in annoyance as the attendant who’d delivered the report bowed respectfully in apology.

“Pah! Blasted country nobles...” he spat.

The cause for his irritation was, in fact, a truly petty matter.

“Speaking of which, Lord Berman... I must say I find it most perplexing that a man of culture such as yourself, who hails from a long and honorable line of central nobility, would rule over a domain smaller than that of a country bumpkin such as this Outcount of Rudolvon,” said a fellow nobleman at the party that Viscount Berman was attending.

The viscount wrinkled his nose in displeasure but kept his head.

“Well, yes, the outcount’s lands may be expansive, but they’re mostly farmland and forest. Hardly anything to boast about.”

“True indeed, but if it were me, my lord, I would find it unbearable to know that I was inferior in even a single way to an uncultured noble such as he. Ah, of course, if that thought does not vex you, my lord, then all is well...”

Berman was about to argue the issue, but he realized that the man had a point. The thought that he was lesser than a country bumpkin — in any way — did indeed sting his pride. Then the other noble leaned in to his ear and whispered, “Might I offer some advice, my lord? Why not clear some land for yourself in the Sealence Forest?”

“The Sealence Forest, you say?”

The domains of Berman and Rudolvon were separated by a vast expanse of woodland — one of the largest regions of forest in the empire. The border between their lands was never made entirely clear because no one ever bothered to head into the woods and actually figure out where the line should be drawn. As such, the forest had always been used as a rough delineation of the two domains.

“I see. Any land I clear on my side of the forest would belong to me, thereby expanding the size of my domain.”

Having never decided where the boundary line actually lay, he could technically cut down all but a single line of trees at the far edge of the forest and still claim it was fair game. He could then argue that all the newly cleared land should belong to him. As ridiculous as the idea might seem to some, it represented a way of thinking common amongst the gentry, in whom such selfish behavior was the norm. Furthermore, the viscount was no procrastinator; once he’d made up his mind, he arranged for the clearing to begin immediately. That was when he ran into trouble.

The forest was not a vacant stretch of wilderness; people lived there. The Lulu tribe who inhabited the region fiercely opposed the plan to cut down the forest, adopting a do-or-die stance and making it clear that they intended to resist until the bitter end.

“Impertinent knaves...”

The viscount immediately brought the issue to the Ebony Moon Ministry, which handled military affairs. As a result of his commitment to bribery, the ministry quickly dispatched a centuria of a hundred soldiers to the area for him. Yet to his dismay, upon arriving at the scene, the centurion who commanded the unit declared that they were not going to take any military action

against the minority tribe.

"The mission I was given is to keep the peace in the area. Nothing more."

Thoroughly irritated, the viscount stormed off, muttering, "Useless... You're all useless! No one listens to me!"

This setback did not stop him from trying to get his way, though. Now he set his sights on a new target who he hoped would finally help him get things rolling: the emperor's beloved daughter, Mia Luna Tearmoon.

The plan was simple. He was going to craft an exquisite jeweled box and offer it to her as a "present." The catch was that he was going to adorn a section of the jewel box with the wood of the Unicorn's Horn — a special type of tree that only grew in the forest he wanted to clear. It didn't have to be too complicated. A small carving would suffice, so long as it caught her attention. Then he would say to her, "Your Highness, if such carvings appeal to you, I can make as many as you'd like... but I would require the wood of a certain forest to do so..." With Mia's backing, he would hold sway over the imperial army. So long as he could convince them to take action, exterminating the Lulus would be an easy task.

There was a second plan, which he intended to enact at the same time. He was going to kidnap a couple of children from the Lulus, sell them off to slavers, and make it look like it was the imperial soldiers' doing. The Lulus, in their rage, would surely cease their passive resistance and retaliate with active violence. Once there was open bloodshed, the army would have no choice but to fight. If this worked, he wouldn't even need to wait for the box to be made.

His master plan, however, would ultimately be unnecessary... because one day, some gossip reached his ears.

"Have you heard? Recently, Her Highness has taken quite the liking to a hairpin made from Unicorn's Horn. Apparently, she wears it every day..."

Assuming this was true, he didn't even need to make any jeweled boxes. Unicorn's Horn grew right there in the Sealence Forest. If that was all it took to please the princess, he could get a hairpin made right away.

And so, unbeknownst to Mia, she stood at the brink of history, the dice of fate in her hands yet uncast. They continued to roll

quietly on her palm, their every spin putting them closer to its edge. Then, with the arrival of a guest, they fell.

“Milady, Viscount Berman has requested an audience...”

“My, who might that be? I don’t believe I’ve ever heard of him before.”

With bowstrings taut and conflict nigh, Tearmoon’s fate she would unwittingly decide.

Chapter 6: A Horse Shampoo and a Selfish Princess

"Greetings, Viscount Berman. I believe this is the first time we've met."

My word... She's...

Mia appeared before Berman, and he found that he couldn't look away. The young princess's beauty was mesmerizing.

Now, on a side note, Mia had been looking especially gorgeous recently. While previous descriptions of her would have been something to the effect of "Okay, if I had to choose between pretty and not pretty, then I guess I'd go with pretty," the current Mia was quite a different beast. Right now, she looked better than ever.

The biggest contributor to her newfound luster was... not her radiantly healthy skin, though that certainly didn't hurt and was the product of Anne's diligent care. It was her hair. Her hair practically *glowed.*

It flows with such elegant beauty! As if it were the mane of the finest warhorse as it gallops across a battlefield!

The secret behind the dazzling hair that so captivated the viscount was, in fact, shampoo that Prince Abel had given her as a present.

"This doesn't just clean hair, it supplies the hair with nutrients and improves its luster. It's known to be a very good product. I figured you've probably received so many of the usual presents that you're sick of them, so I went with something a little different. I think you'll like it."

Mia had worn a wide smile as she gleefully read the letter Abel had included with his gift, and she'd used the shampoo every day since. The sight of her humming cheerfully to herself on her daily trips to the bath was a delight for Anne as well, who always watched her with a fond smile.

Oh, Prince Abel... What a wonderful gift from a wonderful person.

What Abel didn't mention in his letter was that his wonderful shampoo... was actually meant for horses. Being fellow members of the horsemanship club, he'd figured she'd appreciate having the best horse shampoo to use for grooming her favorite horses. Horse hair was more delicate than human hair and required premium products to maintain. Mia however, went ahead and used it on herself. As a result, her hair was now silky smooth and glowed with a luster only seen on the choicest of steeds.

This would later lead to an explosion in the popularity of horse shampoos in Tearmoon, but that is a story for another time.

Ah, so that's why. I always wondered why people were so eager to glorify her as the "Great Sage of the Empire." I see now that this beauty is the basis for all their praise, thought Berman, who now assumed that the source of her great repute was her attractiveness. *All that talk about her wisdom and saintliness must be coming from the fools who were duped by her beauty. This princess is nothing more than a little girl who always wants her own way.*

He had proof, in fact, as he'd heard that a few days ago Mia had favored her friend's father with a deal. Admittedly, he found it rather baffling for her to so honor some merchant who was a noble in name only, but it was nevertheless evidence of her selfishness. That boded well for him. So long as he could show her something she liked, there was a good chance she'd behave exactly as he wanted her to.

She might be the princess, but even the princess must enjoy receiving gifts. Especially if it's something she's developed a particular liking for recently.

Growing increasingly confident in his plan, he reached for the present he'd prepared.

"I've been told that recently, Your Highness has been quite fond of an ornament made from unicorn's horn..." he said as he shifted his gaze up toward her head.

As he'd expected, she was indeed wearing a hairpin made from Unicorn's Horn.

Hmm... for a piece of wood, I must admit that it looks rather nice. I suppose it all depends on who's wearing it.

What he didn't notice was that Mia's eyes had narrowed as soon as he'd mentioned her hairpin.

"Well, I suppose it's true that I've been wearing this hairpin a

lot recently..."

"Is it now? Excellent. In that case, please take a look at this."

Berman produced a hairpin and presented it to Mia. It had been made by craftsmen into the sort of gaudy design that was meant to appeal to children.

"My..." She studied the hairpin for a while before smiling at the viscount. "This does indeed interest me very much."

"I see, I see. Well, as a matter of fact, this was made from the wood of *a certain tree*, and.." He resisted a sly smirk as he proceeded to explain how the tree grew in the Sealence Forest.

"Is that so? The Sealence Forest..." she said with her wide eyes full of surprise.

Feeling that momentum was on his side, Berman leaned forward and went for one last push.

"Yes, and if Your Highness happens to be interested, then please __"

"I am *very* interested. In fact, I believe I will go take a look at this forest myself."

"...Huh?"

Berman froze. It took him a few seconds to piece together another sentence.

"U-Uh, Your Highness... there's no need for you to personally __"

"Ludwig. I wish to depart immediately. Make the necessary arrangements."

"I-Immediately?! B-But..."

That meant he wouldn't have time to hide things. Things that he couldn't afford to have seen.

O-Okay, calm down. This kind of thing takes time. She can't possibly just...

He shot a desperate glance at the young bespectacled official standing beside Mia. Surely, he would have something to say about this.

"I swear, Your Highness, the things you ask for sometimes..." the young official sighed, shaking his head. Then he just shrugged. "As you wish."

Berman's eyes almost popped out of their sockets. He stood there stunned, staring with his mouth agape at Ludwig, then at Mia.

"My? Haven't you heard?" said Mia. She looked the viscount in the eyes as a mischievous grin crept across her lips. "They call me

the selfish princess, you know?”

Chapter 7: A Furious Mia's Carriage Trip

At Ludwig's request, a special unit was formed within the Tearmoon imperial guard. Known as the "Princess Guard," its members were handpicked by Ludwig for their loyalty and adaptability, for they were an emergency response team. Their job: be on constant standby to comply with Mia's every whim, and to follow and protect her wherever she went.

Flanked by her new squad of faithful guardians, Mia boarded her carriage and set out for Viscount Berman's domain.

"My," said Mia as she sat down in her seat. "It's been barely an hour since I gave the order and we're already on the road. Very impressive, Ludwig."

"Not at all, Your Highness. It's natural to learn from past experiences, and your unplanned visit to the slums the other day was a particularly pedagogical one," he said, the edge in his remark tempered by the knowing grin on his usually stern face.

Ludwig had faith that everything Mia did was, by and large, correct, for he trusted that her actions were driven by wisdom and virtue. Being a capable government official, he had long since caught wind of the trouble that was brewing within the Berman viscounty. Therefore, when he'd heard that the viscount had requested an audience, he immediately suspected that something unforeseen might happen and preemptively began preparations.

Still, I wish she'd give the rest of us a little bit more to work with. It was fine this time because I had prior information, but... Then again, I suppose it's our duty as her subjects to accurately grasp Her Highness's intentions.

At times, he noticed that, in her genius, Mia's logic took leaps so vast that he had trouble keeping up. The sheer speed at which her mind worked blinded her to the clefts of reasoning that she'd cleared with ease but others struggled to cross. She was always thinking two or three steps ahead of everyone else. That, however,

was likely a sign that she was still young. Should she continue to grow and mature, she would surely become a most sagacious monarch. He regarded her, his sense of loyalty toward the princess he'd devoted himself to deepening... What was left of his good sense struggled in vain to contain his ballooning expectations.

"Well then, Ludwig, I'd very much appreciate it if you could tell me more about this Viscount Berman and his domain," Mia said, smiling.

Hmm. Knowing Her Highness, she likely knows everything there is to know already. And yet, she still asks to hear it from me...

There yet remained a childlike innocence to her smile — the kind that was at once endearing and suggestive of an absence of thought — that almost seemed genuine. Which made it all the more jarring to imagine the dizzying kaleidoscope of thoughts that it undoubtedly hid.

Ludwig shook his head. He had every intention of correctly parsing Mia's intentions and acting accordingly, but the bitter truth was that he likely couldn't understand even half of what she was thinking.

If I had to venture a guess, I'd say she probably wants to verify the accuracy of her information against mine. Other than that, maybe she wishes to sort out her thoughts by talking through them as she contemplates how best to solve this issue...

"In that case, allow me to explain. Currently, Viscount Berman is..."

Mia could feel a drop of cold sweat roll down her back as she listened to Ludwig divulge the information he held.

"And that is more or less the extent of my knowledge on the matter..." he said as he concluded.

Freaking hell! she mouthed silently, too shaken to mind the appropriateness of her vocabulary. *That was way too close for comfort!*

The jitters she felt were well-warranted. The events Ludwig described were riddled with red flags, each more guillotine-y than the last. Cutting down the Sealence Forest would require the forceful expulsion of the local tribe. The local tribe was the Lulus. The Lulus and their forest happened to be right next door to the Rudolvons. Worst of all, it would all happen with her explicit and public approval...

She'd read and reread the passage in her diary, but she simply had no recollection of the event. It was bewildering to think that so much had been brewing under her nose, and she'd been completely clueless until now.

I see... Well, this certainly explains why my relationship with Tiona turned sour.

The previous timeline was one thing, but the diary continued to foretell the dissolution of their friendship in the current timeline. She'd seen no signs of such a thing happening during their time at school, so she had been thoroughly baffled...

I've cracked the case... and it's all Viscount Berman's fault! Unforgivable!

A wave of roiling anger began to rise from within her. Ludwig might have glanced at her, and he might have said something to the effect of, "I've always believed in her... but it's good to see that she's someone who can feel righteous anger in the face of aristocratic tyranny..." but she was too busy seething with her ostensibly righteous anger to hear. She only zoned back in when Ludwig tapped her to get her attention.

"That just about sums up what I know. Currently, it seems clear that Viscount Berman is at fault, but..." he said, trailing off without finishing his sentence.

The fact of the matter was that recognizing the problem was only the beginning. What came next was the hard part. It was actually sort of difficult to claim that what the viscount was trying to do was wrong. Cutting down forest to create more land wasn't inherently a bad thing, and so long as he was doing it in his own domain, it was technically none of their business.

While the exact location of the border between his and Rudolvon's domains was indeed rather vague, that wasn't sufficient reason to stop him from proceeding with his plan. Though the Lulus were protesting, between a minority tribe and the viscount, the empire's central government would surely side with the Viscount. Furthermore, the military had already dispatched a unit of soldiers to the area. Having them withdraw would require a good reason, such as tangible evidence of peace having been restored.

Ludwig hadn't been able to come up with a solution to all these problems, and it wasn't for lack of trying.

"So, Your Highness, what do we do now?" he asked with a troubled look on his face.

He'd wracked his brains trying to find an answer, but to no avail. Mia however, showed no signs of such distress.

"What do we do? We teach 'em a damn lesson, obviously!" she declared, her nostrils flaring in anger.

When it came to the Princess of the Tearmoon Empire, Mia Luna Tearmoon, it was widely known that she had two archenemies. One was Sion Sol Sunkland. The other was Tiona Rudolvon. However, neither of them stood at the guillotine on the final day of her life. Her execution itself was carried out by someone else.

The one who had the grisly honor of lopping off the young lady's head was a man by the name of Dion Alaia. He'd been an officer in the imperial army, but as soon as the revolution began, he joined the revolutionary army. Many prominent imperial generals fell by his blade, and he was a pivotal factor in the imperial army's eventual downfall. As one of the leading contributors to the revolutionary army's victory, he claimed his reward in the form of a request: to personally behead Princess Mia.

At first, Sion was perplexed by this. After hearing the man's story, however, his motivation became much clearer. The Battle of Sealence Forest — a conflict caused by Mia's selfishness — had claimed the lives of all his men. Every last one of his soldiers had died, leaving him to walk out of that forest alone and full of bitterness. Vengeance for his fallen comrades was what had pushed him into the loving arms of the revolutionary army.

"Why do I still not hear the sounds of battle? Did the army send a bunch of loafers in place of soldiers?"

Dion Alaia, centurion of the hundred soldiers dispatched to the Berman domain, stood before the viscount in his guest room, his face locked into a businesslike smile. He gave Berman the same response as last time.

"As I've said before, my lord, our mission here is simply to keep the peace. To that end, I believe there is no need to engage in any unnecessary hostilities..."

He bowed his head politely, feeling rather proud of himself for not asking the Viscount if he was going senile, considering Dion had said the same thing only a few days ago. Granted, he wasn't sure how much longer his better judgment would last if the viscount

kept this up, but that was a problem for future Dion. At the moment, he was totally nailing the whole "being a responsible adult" thing. In fact, he was feeling so reasonable that he even explained his rationale.

"That forest is Lulu territory," he added. "In the event of a battle, we'll doubtlessly suffer significant casualties."

The way he saw it, he was confident that he could make it out alive himself, but bringing all his men back unharmed was going to be a tall order.

"Aren't soldiers meant to risk their lives for their lord? What do you think I'm paying you for?"

"Are you quite all right, my lord? We are His Majesty's soldiers, not yours. Is your mind growing dull?"

His better judgment had called it quits. In response, the viscount gave him a furious glare, but Dion shrugged it off and continued.

"We are here under orders from the Ebony Moon Ministry, which His Majesty has entrusted with authority over military affairs. The mission we were given is to keep the peace. Recklessly engaging in battle would run counter to His Majesty's—"

"Pah! Enough! Begone already!"

The viscount waved him away in exasperation.

"Bloody nobles, I swear... They just tell you to go and kill each other like it's all fun and games."

Dion stepped out of the viscount's manor and let out a sigh.

"Hey, Captain, you're done?"

Upon seeing him come out, a large man who'd been waiting near the gate rushed over. Everything about the man from his imposing figure to his burly beard gave the impression that he was a bandit of some sort. Everything except for his eyes, which had the sharpness of a trained soldier.

"How'd it go?"

"Same old. I told him it's too dangerous to be fighting in that forest. The two of us are probably the only ones who would make it out alive."

"Gahaha, we damn well are. But we can't have that, now can we? It's gonna be a bad look if the captain and vice-captain are the only survivors," said the large man with a hearty chuckle.

Dion shrugged.

“Gotta say, though, considering he went so far as to pay a personal visit to the capital, I was expecting him to come back with a direct order from His Majesty or something. Looks like my concern was unwarranted.”

“Eh, I wouldn’t be so sure about that, Captain.”

“Hm? What do you—”

Dion’s question was cut short at the sight of a group of people approaching them. They were clearly soldiers, but the armor they wore was far more ceremonial than what was typical of the imperial army. There was only one group in the army who would don such impractically adorned armor, and it was a collection of its most loyal soldiers — those charged with protecting the emperor and his family.

“The imperial guard...”

“Sure is,” whispered the larger man. “Rumors are that Her Highness is coming here personally on an inspection visit.”

“Well, well, now isn’t that just marvelous.” said Dion, his voice dripping with bitter sarcasm.

His vice-captain grimaced at his reaction.

“Better turn that frown upside down, Captain. Her Highness came all this way to see us, after all. We can’t be acting rude.”

“Sorry, but I’ve been through too much shit to get all excited about princesses and princes and all that jazz. Besides...”

“Yeah, I know. Smells a little fishy, don’t it?”

“The timing’s too bloody perfect. Berman just came back from his trip to the capital, and now she shows up? I’ll bet he’s the one who brought her here. Now all we have to do is wait and find out what kind of nonsense he filled her ears with...”

“Yeah... Then again,” said the vice-captain as he scratched his bushy beard. “Don’t they say that Her Highness is some sort of sage? That she’s real smart in the head?”

“Here’s a saying for you. Nothing in life is ever the way you hope it will be.”

“Now that’s a real pessimistic take on things, ain’t it? Which philosopher was it who said that?”

“I did. Wishful thinking almost always ends in disappointment. That said, it’s also how I got so good with a sword, so I guess there’s something to be said for it.”

“You mean your disappointments made you decide that the solution is to get good enough so you can handle whatever

happens?"

"In a word, yes."

The large man broke into a loud bout of laughter.

"That's exactly the kind of philosophy I'd expect to hear from Dion-nedes."

Just then, a young girl appeared at the front of the group, closely flanked by guards.

Huhhhh... So that's her, huh... Princess Mia...

She looked up. Their eyes met.

"Eeeeeeeek!"

And she promptly fainted. Everyone looked at each other.

"...So, what do we do now, Captain?"

"I don't know." Dion shrugged. "Scream and fall over ourselves, I guess."

Chapter 8: Ludwig Hatches a Plot

Wh-Wh-Why in the moons is he *here, of all people?!*

After recovering from her blackout, Mia found herself face-to-face with Dion.

"I'm glad to see you're all right, Your Highness," he said with a professional smile before lowering his head respectfully. "Dion Alaia. I'm honored to be graced by your presence."

His smile was perfect. There wasn't a shred of hostility to it. Nevertheless, Mia couldn't help but shudder in terror. Perfect as it was, it still chilled her to the bone, and looking at his face made her feel an icy sensation on the back of her neck, as though something hard and metallic were pushing against it.

"I'm the captain of the soldiers here. The army sent us to..." He trailed off when he noticed Mia's gaze drifting. "Uh, Your Highness? Is something the matter?"

Mia snapped back to attention and looked at him. There, right in front of her, was Dion. The sight of his face so close was terrifying, and the way his eyes were fixed on hers gave her the shakes. It was as if he were peering into her soul.

"E-Eek—"

She felt her legs turn to jelly, and she'd have landed on her rump had the large vice-captain nearby not caught her as she fell.

"Are you okay, Princess? Did the carriage ride make you sick?"

His words of concern failed to register in her mind. She kept staring at Dion, unable to look away. He raised an eyebrow.

"Is there something on my face?"

"N-N-No, there's nothing on your face. I-I-It's just that, um... your vice-captain is a bear of a man, and he looks a little scary."

"Gahaha. Bear, huh? Can't argue with that. I guess a face like mine don't sit right with the princess."

The vice-captain laughed heartily, but Dion didn't join him. Instead, he kept his eyes on Mia, calmly appraising her.

She's lying. It's not him. This whole time, she's been scared of me.

If his assumption was correct, then he'd have to give the

princess some credit for having a rather keen pair of eyes. She was *right* to be scared of him.

The vice-captain might look like a bandit, but he was a big softie toward children. Unless she did something absolutely atrocious, he'd hardly raise his voice, much less his hand against her. Even if she were to dive at him with a weapon in hand, he'd aim only for her weapon to try and disarm her. He was a gentle giant.

Dion, meanwhile, looked every bit the gracious gentleman, but should the need arise, he'd plunge a sword through a child without a second thought. If someone came at him with a weapon, he'd have no mercy. Furthermore, when it came to the business of killing, he was a far deadlier warrior than his vice-captain. Therefore she was absolutely correct in directing her fear and caution his way, but...

It's one thing for a fighter to suss out my threat level on the battlefield, but this is a princess we're talking about. Born and raised in the pampered environment of the imperial court. If she managed to figure that out, then this is a girl who should not be underestimated.

His silent musing came to an end when the young official who'd followed Mia here spoke up.

"Your Highness," said Ludwig, "I suggest you go and inspect the forest, accompanied by Captain Dion."

"...Eh?"

Mia gave Ludwig a dumb look as she let out a confused yelp.

O-Ohoho, I see now. He's joking. Oh, the stupid four-eyes, always cracking jokes. They're in such terrible taste...

Her attempt at escapism was foiled by Ludwig's next statement.

"There is a risk of the viscount interfering with our plans if we head directly to his manor like this. Your Highness will gain a far better grasp of the situation if you take a look by yourself in secret."

Realizing that he meant what he said, she began to panic.

"Wha— Wait! But!"

"Hold on there, Mr. Ludwig, sir. I know you have your plans and all, but what you're proposing isn't that simple," said Dion with a grimace of annoyance. "Also, you do realize that means I'll be taking Her Highness into the forest by herself, right?"

"What are you talking about? We of the Princess Guard will of course follow—"

“You’ll be doing none of that. That armor you lot wear makes you stick out like sore thumbs. Things are pretty sensitive in the forest right now. Walking in with that stuff on is an open provocation. Piss off the Lulus and things’ll get bloody. Any of you feel like heading back and telling His Majesty that you started a war? Unless...” A twisted, derisive smile crept across his lips. “You all strip down. But can you? That armor is the symbol of the imperial guard. Can you take it off?”

The leader of the guards held his gaze, then smiled.

“If we must, then we shall. Our pride lies not in what we wear, but what we do. And what we do is serve and protect Her Highness.” He turned to the others. “Princess Guard! Drop your gear! Remove your armor! We travel with swords only!”

His order was immediately met with a flurry of motion as the guards began to undo their suits of mail. Not a man hesitated. Even someone like Dion couldn’t help but feel his eyes go wide as the scene unfolded before him. The imperial guard was an elite group known not only for their unwavering loyalty and impeccable skill but also their extreme pride. What he’d just witnessed, however, was devoid of vanity.

“No way... Is their devotion to the princess so thorough that it’s tempering their hubris?” he murmured in disbelief.

“That’s quite enough, Guard Captain,” said Ludwig as he gestured at the guards to stop. “I believe the point has been made. We will need a distraction for Viscount Berman. You and your guards will be coming with the rest of us to keep the man busy.”

“But— With all due respect, sir, that’s—”

“Two men.” Ludwig silenced him with two fingers held up. “Two of your men may accompany the princess. The rest come with us to the Berman manor.”

Then, he turned to Dion.

“Well, Captain? Will that be satisfactory?”

“Uh, well... Huh.” Dion shook his head in a resigned fashion. “Bloody hell. I guess I have no reason to say no.”

The way Ludwig made concessions was almost extortion, leaving him with no choice but to agree. Admittedly, he’d also grown a little curious about this princess who commanded such unqualified devotion from her guards.

“Excellent. Well, there you have it, Your Highness,” said Ludwig, turning back to Mia. “Have you any other concerns?”

Mia looked at him. Through sheer willpower, she managed a strained smile and refrained from speaking.

A-A-Are you kidding me? Have I any concerns?! I sure do, you stupid four-eyes!

So instead, she screamed her grievances inside her own head. She was perceptive enough to recognize that this was a done deal and no further input to the contrary would be allowed. Still, that didn't mean she had to like it.

I have nothing but *concerns about this, damn it!*

For the rest of their conversation, she continued to smile while the voice in her mind howled in dismay.

Ugh, how in the moons did it come to this...

She sighed as the horse she rode moved at a leisurely trot. Leading their group was the very man who had separated her head from her body, Captain Dion. Never in her wildest nightmares did she imagine she would one day have him as a guide. The thought made her feel particularly miserable, and she sat loosely upon her steed, allowing it to shake her freely from side to side as it walked.

"Hey, Princess, your riding's shaping up real nice," said the vice-captain, who was just a little ahead of her. "Most noble girls just tense up on a horse, but you're staying relaxed and letting its steps flow through you. Not bad at all..."

"My, that's very nice of you to say."

Mia smiled at the bandit-faced vice-captain. As far as she could tell, looks notwithstanding, the large man wasn't a bad person. In fact, he'd been fairly considerate toward her on their trip so far. Not only was he probably a nice guy on the inside, he was the vice-captain, which suggested he was in a position to check Dion to a degree. If things got thorny, she might be able to rely on him to keep his captain under control. She could hear the calculating side of her instincts telling her that she should definitely get on friendly terms with the large man. Which might actually just be her ego having its moment after being complimented on her horsemanship, but whatever. Even during the summer holidays, she made a point of riding horses whenever she could find the time. She deserved some praise.

It wasn't just a hobby, either. Far from it. To her, horse riding was literally a matter of life and death. If the worst came to pass, the only things she could rely on were those subjects loyal to her

and the physical ability to hightail it out of danger. As it turns out, the Sword of Damocles can be a great source of motivation to learn a new skill.

"Say, Vice-Captain, if I had to — this is completely hypothetical, mind you — run away and Captain Dion was chasing me, do you think I could make it past the empire's border safely?"

"Huh? Uh, well..."

"Not a chance. Sorry to burst your bubble, but I'd be on you in half a day."

She looked ahead to find that Dion had turned around on his horse to face her. The smile on his face was friendly. So terrifyingly friendly.

"So, just some friendly advice," he continued. "If you're ever thinking of eloping with some cute boy, make sure I never find out. Or you'd better give yourselves a very big head start."

"All right, enough with the teasing, Captain. That said, though, give you another ten years, and I bet you'll be as good a rider as he is."

"...Ah, I see. Ten years, huh."

If the future played out as her diary foretold, then she had at most five more years until the revolution began. She hung her head, crestfallen at the thought. The vice-captain's horse whinnied, almost as if it were trying to comfort her.

"My, that horse..."

She regarded the large man's steed. There was a sense of elegant strength to the way its prominent muscles shifted rhythmically as it walked, and its silky black hair was smooth and glowing.

"What a beautiful horse. Its hair especially. The glow is wonderful."

"Huh. You're into horses, Princess?" The big man grinned and scratched his head, clearly pleased to hear his horse praised. "This one's definitely a real beauty. You like the hair, right? I actually wash it using a special horse shampoo I get from abroad."

"My, is that so? I feel a sort of connection with it. I wonder why. It's as if we share something dearly held."

The horse glanced at her and huffed amicably.

It took them half a day to reach the edge of the Sealence Forest. Dion's hundred-man squad had set up camp in a clearing a ways

from the forest. Soldiers moved busily through neat rows of makeshift tents, all of which was surrounded by a simple fence. Their brisk but orderly movements would normally be a sight to behold, speaking to their discipline and training. There was something else, however, that grabbed Mia's attention and wouldn't let go: a sense of tension in the air.

"Why does everyone seem so... on edge?"

"Well, Your Highness has arrived," answered one of her two guards. "Surely, it's only natural for them to be nervous."

Mia shook her head.

"No, it's not that... This feels... different."

It felt like the calm before a storm. There was an unsettling energy that buzzed everywhere, as though everything was moments away from bursting into flames. It was a sentiment she'd felt before.

It feels terribly similar to the night before the revolution began.

"Impressive. It seems like Your Highness has a fighter's senses," said Dion as he walked up beside her, his smile still unbroken. "This is a battlefield, and the soldiers are treating it as such. They ready their hearts and minds to fight at a moment's notice. Those that do not will lose their lives."

"My!"

The situation seemed especially cruel to Mia. Having a dreadful berserker as a captain was bad enough... They had to endure such a grim atmosphere while working themselves to the bone under the orders of a terrifying man who saw humans as little more than heads to be chopped off.

"I feel terribly sorry for them..." she said, feeling a profound sense of pity for the soldiers.

"Does she now..." mused Dion quietly. "If she has the capacity to feel sorry for soldiers enduring the abusive whims of nobility, then this princess might really be the sage they say she is..."

Fortunately — for Mia, that is — Dion might be a great soldier, but he was no mind reader. His thoughts on the matter went no further, leaving him with a budding sense of respect for her.

"Is there truly a need to station soldiers here?"

"Personally, I don't think so. If anything, leaving soldiers here only increases the risk of battle."

"In that case..."

"Thing is, we've been ordered to stay here. Even if I think it's better for us to withdraw the troops, I can't leave without a good

reason." Dion shook his head and shrugged.

"A reason to withdraw..." Mia put a hand to her chin as the gears in her head began to turn.

As she walked through the temporary garrison, smiling at and thanking the soldiers for their work, she continued to think.

A reason to withdraw...

She stood on the eve of a battle that, should it break out, would lead directly to her guillotined fate. Crisis loomed like a fast-approaching wildfire, and she could already feel the heat on her face. Spurred by the deadly gravity of the situation, her brain kicked into high gear. She could almost hear it whistling like an overheating steam engine.

In fact, she was thinking so hard that she couldn't even control her own gaze. It drifted around aimlessly. Whenever a soldier appeared in her view, she would smile reflexively before moving on.

From the soldiers' perspectives, however, things were very different. What they saw was her glowing skin, which owed its splendor to Anne's loving care, and her horse shampoo-enhanced hair that flowed like silk. Decked out with such armaments of beauty, Mia was a force to be reckoned with. Right now, she looked better than she ever had. On top of that, the riding clothes she wore were decidedly unaristocratic, instead exuding a plebeian air that was endearingly familiar to the onlookers. The way she looked into the distance with eyes so lustrous they seemed almost glassy... It was enchanting. Almost unearthly. She was the kind of princess that existed in the imaginations of every young man, and all the training in the world could not prepare Dion's elite troops for the firepower of her smile.

"Whoa... She's so pretty... That's Her Highness, Princess Mia?"

"And she's here to personally meet with foot soldiers like us? What they say is true... She really is a saint."

Similar whispers could be heard throughout the camp, interspersed with fond sighs as more hapless victims succumbed to Mia's charm. The object of their affection, meanwhile, noticed none of this. She was still deep in thought.

Mia still had a trump card: the privilege to be selfish. Most demands, even if they were fairly excessive, would be accepted so long as she made them. A military order from the Ebony Moon

Ministry could theoretically be overturned by a direct demand from the emperor's daughter. While there was no end to the tragedies this privilege had spawned throughout history, in this specific case, it was a powerful weapon in her arsenal. Powerful, but not omnipotent. The question was whether or not she could create the conditions that would allow her to make her demand.

Easier said than done...

Asking for an expensive present was one thing, but requesting a withdrawal of troops was another matter altogether. She couldn't think of a way to make her demand seem just excessive and not irrational. For example, what would happen if she were to, without any warning, walk up to Dion and tell him to withdraw his troops? Would he just nod and order them to leave? Probably not. His vice-captain would just laugh and shrug her off with something like *Gahaha, pretending you're a general, Your Highness? Real bold of you.* She couldn't have her demand be seen as the senseless babbling of a child. She needed to mold the situation into one that would make it perfectly logical for her to make such a request.

If only there were a good way to do so... Hm?

Suddenly, Mia noticed that her surroundings had changed. Hanging over her was no longer the endless blue of the sky but a canopy of green. In front of her were trees. To her side were trees. Behind her were trees as well. She was standing in the middle of a thick forest — the kind she'd read about in the story that Anne's sister, Elise, had written. Before them led a narrow trail, likely made by animals, that wound its way into the dark depths of the forest.

"Um... Where are we?"

"Hm? The forest, obviously. I said we were going in a while ago, didn't I?"

"...Eh?"

Her mouth fell open.

"We're at the front line right now."

"Th-The front line?!"

"Yeah. Hell, we might be standing in enemy territory already. Granted, there hasn't been any fighting yet, so I doubt they'll just pop out and try to murder us."

She heard the first half of his sentence and freaked out, so the second half never made it into her ears.

Wh-Wh-Why in the moons would you bring me to a place like this?!

Just because I was lost in thought doesn't mean you can lead me wherever you want!

Though she was officially here on an inspection trip, she had no intention of actually *inspecting* anything. Heck, she didn't even want to go to the camp. She just came to stop any fighting from breaking out. That was all. Instead, here she was, standing in what was arguably the most dangerous place possible.

Just as she was about to protest, Dion whispered to her in a low voice.

"Oh, by the way, Your Highness, I'd recommend keeping your hands away from anything in the forest."

"Huh?"

"The trees here are sacred to the Lulus. They consider them a treasure conferred upon them by God. If you happened to scratch up a couple and an arrow pings you in the head, well... Can't blame them for that, can you?"

I sure can! What do you mean an arrow pings me in the head?! That's terrifying!

She peered gingerly at the trees around her. All of a sudden, every gleam and sparkle in the surrounding darkness seemed like the arrow tip of an archer in hiding. Her chicken heart began to squawk loudly in her chest.

"I-I think I've seen quite enough. I'd like to go back to town imme— Bwaah!"

She tripped over a thick protruding root and went down in an extravagantly boisterous fashion, landing with a loud thud.

"Your Highness! Are you all right?!"

"Are you hurt anywhere?!"

Her guards dashed to her side. Dion, in stark contrast, simply stood there and sighed in exasperation.

"Would you please watch yourself, Your Highness? We're not strolling the capital right now, you know."

Despite his pointed remark, he still extended a hand. Mia took it and pulled herself up.

"I-It's that root's fault for sticking up like that. This stupid tree had to..."

And that was when it clicked.

"Y-Yes... Yes, that's it... It's all this tree's fault!"

An evil grin spread across her lips as she gazed up at the towering plant.

Chapter 9: The Princess with the High-Powered Gaze

"That's it... It's all this tree's fault... This tree is to blame..."

"Your Highness?"

Dion frowned suspiciously at the mumbling princess.

"How dare you stick your root in front of my leg! What an impudent tree!" she suddenly shouted in a hysterical tone. Then...

Thunk!

She kicked the trunk. It was a very ungraceful kick, the kind you'd expect to see not from a princess but from some street thug. Immediately, a jolt shot up Dion's spine and he tensed, sensing malice from invisible gazes focusing in on Mia.

"Bloody hell."

He spat in annoyance, lunged forward, and drew his sword all in one motion. He landed directly in front of Mia and focused on listening to the forest. There it was. The unmistakable whistle of wood ripping through air. Then again. And again. And again.

Four arrows.

All dead-on accurate. I guess that's a hunting tribe for you. But thanks to that...

His sword arm blurred. Three arcing flashes encircled him like a shell, appearing and fading almost simultaneously. A second later, three arrows lay in pieces at his feet. As for the final arrow...

"...Eh? Uh... Huh?"

Mia blinked a few times. Then she looked up. A shaft was embedded in the tree trunk, barely an inch above her tiny, fragile head. Dion had purposefully let it pass, having accurately read the arrow's course. She continued to stare at it, her eyes going a little crossed.

"H-Hyaaaaaaah!"

She let out a piercing shriek and fell on her rear. The impact dislodged her hairpin and it landed on the ground beside her. Before she could do anything else she was scooped up by Dion, who

cut down another arrow while carrying her under his arm.

"Captain!"

The vice-captain, his sword drawn, appeared slightly late to the party. He was quickly followed by Mia's guards. Dion glanced at them and barked out a curt order.

"Fall back! Out of the forest!"

Then he began to run, glaring furiously at Mia whom he still carried like a bundle under his arm.

"With all due respect, Your Highness, I'm going to kill you for this."

"E-Eeeek!"

Mia screamed again in terror. In the back of her mind, she muzzily noted that a murderous glare from Dion was even scarier than being shot at by arrows.

"I swear, I *just* told you to keep your hands away from anything in the forest... In case you were wondering, that includes *feet!*"

Tears welled up in Mia's eyes as she twitched in absolute terror. She managed to croak out in a hoarse voice, "R-Run away!"

"What do you think I'm doing, damn it? It's fine. I'll take you back to the camp."

"No, further! Back to the viscounty town! I won't feel safe until we're all the way back to the viscount's manor!"

Dion glanced down to find her looking up at him, eyes steady. Everything else was a quivering mess, but her gaze did not falter. He cocked an eyebrow and nodded. It just so happened that he preferred for her to stay put in town as well.

"Fair enough. In that case, feel free to head back to the manor with your two guards. I'll send a few more men with you as an escort."

He exhaled. At the end of the day, the princess was still a child. Just a selfish child who thought only about herself.

"Th-That's not enough!"

He glanced down at her again. She still held his gaze, and for a moment, he thought he saw a glimmer of something in her widened pupils. He frowned. Was that... determination?

"What's not enough?"

"A few men? Do you know who is normally tasked with protecting me? The Princess Guard! The elite of the elite! Do you truly think *a few men* will be enough to ensure my safety?"

"...And just what exactly do you mean by that, Your Highness?"

“Bring all of them! I want every last one of your men to guard me on my way back to the viscounty town!”

“Now hold on there, Princess.” The vice-captain’s voice could be heard even above their frantic steps. “I know you’re upset, but that’s going a little too far. Right, Captain?”

In any other situation, Dion would have immediately agreed. Instead, he said nothing. His eyes narrowed, but they remained fixed squarely on Mia. What was that glimmer he saw? He needed to be sure.

“Moving an army takes time, Your Highness… The camp needs to be taken down. Tents dismantled. Fences removed. Supplies need to be transported as well…”

“Are you implying there is something more important than my personal safety?”

They stared at each other for a while, neither conceding so much as a blink. Eventually, Dion let out a breath. Then he flipped her around and shifted both arms underneath her, carrying her no longer like a bundle of sheets but like a true princess.

“You know what? You’re absolutely right… Vice-Captain, you heard Her Highness. Once we get back to camp, get the men and their horses ready to move as soon as possible.”

“C-Captain?”

“It’s not up to us,” said Dion. “We just received a direct order. It would appear that Her Highness does not think very highly of our men’s competence. We should, therefore, rectify this unfortunate misconception. Tell the men this is their chance to prove their worth. I want to see formation and lockstep. We’re marching back in parade fashion.” Then he looked at Mia, who had inexplicably closed her eyes and wore an expression of deep relief, and said, “My sincerest apologies for the discomfort, Your Highness, but please bear with us. We’ll be out of the forest before you know it.”

Th-That was absolutely terrifying!

Even as she relaxed in Dion’s arms, Mia could still feel cold sweat dripping down her neck. Her plan had worked even better than she’d thought it would, but…

Sweet moons! I didn’t think they’d actually shoot at me!

Back during the revolutionary war, there’d always be a whole lot of shouting first, which was then followed by some warning shots. She thought it’d be the same this time. Even worse was the

way Dion had reacted. The way he glared at her, she knew without a shadow of a doubt — if she dared to even look away, he'd kill her right then and there. Therefore, she kept staring back. She desperately focused all her energy on forcing her eyes to stay open as she stared at him for dear life!

I-I'm so spent! I feel like I'm going to pass out!

Overcome by exhaustion, she allowed her eyelids to fall closed. Up above, she could still hear Dion going on and on about something or other, but she paid him no further attention. Her eyes hurt from all the staring, and she decided that they deserved some well-earned rest.

Chapter 10: Schadenfreude

"All right, people. I'd like you to keep what happened in that forest a secret. If anyone asks, I tripped on a tree root and ended up a little jumbled from the fall. Okay?" said Mia to her four escorts as they arrived back at the viscounty town. Then she promptly rendezvoused with Ludwig.

Dion, meanwhile, ended up handling the lion's share of work that followed. After all, he'd just moved a full hundred-man squad back to the city without a single casualty. He needed to find accommodations for all one hundred people. This wouldn't have been much of an issue in the imperial capital, but trying to suddenly squeeze so many soldiers into one town in a viscounty proved impossible and he had no choice but to spread his men out and have them stay in a number of neighboring villages. By the time he'd figured all this out, spoken with all the villagers whose houses he was commandeering, and got himself back to the viscounty town, he had to admit that even he was feeling a little tired.

"That was one hell of a job..." said his vice-captain.

"We're lucky I only command a hundred men. If it were a thousand or ten thousand, we'd run ourselves into the ground trying to find enough beds and food. I swear, if there's another round of promotions coming up, I sure hope they leave me out of it."

"I've said it before and I'll say it again. You're the least ambitious person I've ever met, Captain." The large man let out a hearty bout of laughter. "Speaking of which, I guess that saying of yours was dead-on."

"Hm? What saying?"

"About how nothing in life works out the way you want. After hearing all those rumors about how the princess is the 'Great Sage of the Empire' and everything, I was hoping she'd turn out to be a little better than the rest of them. Like you said, I guess it was all just wishful thinking on my part. At the end of the day, them nobles are all the same."

He idly scratched his bushy beard as he talked, but when Dion gave no reply, he frowned. Eventually, the captain let out a deep breath and shook his head.

"That princess... is no pushover. I'd tread carefully around her."

"Huh? But, I mean, she..."

"Make no mistake, she's one of them mastermind types. Sit her in a war room and give her command, and she'll make it look like she's losing until she snatches victory from you in the final moment."

Seeing the dubious frown on the large man's face, he added, "Mark my words, that girl knows what she's doing."

The two men made their way to the local tavern, where upon entering they were greeted by some familiar faces.

"Ah, Captain Dion..."

"Greetings, Captain. Are you done with all the arrangements?"

The two imperial guards who had accompanied Mia quickly rose and straightened themselves.

"Yeah," he answered, returning the greeting with a casual wave of his hand. "Are you two here for a drink, too?"

The two guards, however, lowered their heads.

"Please accept our deepest apologies for the trouble Her Highness has caused..."

"Hm? Trouble?"

"Normally, she never acts so arrogantly... This time, I can only assume that she was shaken by such a close brush with danger. If at all possible, please overlook her behavior today."

Ah, bloody hell. Them too? I swear, it's not really my job to be doing this, but...

Dion pursed his lips for a few seconds before letting out a resigned sigh.

"Okay, listen. It wasn't any trouble and I don't mind. If anything, I need to thank Her Highness for her help."

"Huh? Her... help? What do you mean?"

Both guards blinked at him in surprise, clearly baffled by his words. He smiled wryly at the clueless pair.

"You still don't get it? That was all an act."

He pressed the guards back into their seats and sat himself down at their table. With a snap, he caught the attention of a nearby server and motioned for a drink. After a short wait, a mug of ale appeared on the table. He grabbed the wooden cup, downed

half of it in one big gulp, let out a satisfied sigh, and leaned back in his chair. At this point the guards' patience finally failed them and one spoke up.

"So, Captain Dion... you said something about it all being an act?"

Dion set the mug back on the table and leaned forward.

"Tell me, have the two of you ever been on a battlefield? A real one?"

The guards looked at each other. Their frowns told him more than enough.

"No real experience, huh. See, the thing about armies is that they apply pressure by just being there. If anyone's planning any mischief, then just having an army nearby is an effective deterrence. Now, this works great against bandits and the like, but against determined warriors who are braced for war, it might just end up provoking needless violence."

When two people are both pointing their unsheathed swords at each other, the slightest trigger can lead to swinging. To stare down the blade of an opponent's sword is to stare death in the face, and the fear and anxiety that comes with that can easily morph into a desire to kill — to eliminate the threat at hand.

"Her Rather Perceptive Highness felt the dangerous tension in the air, and rather than watch from the sidelines, she decided to do something about it. The Lulu tribe isn't going to come out of the forest and raid us. They never were a threat to begin with. As long as we leave the forest alone, we can avoid any needless violence. The problem is that these nuances of the battlefield are subtle things, and the higher-ups are very bad at subtlety. Your dear princess probably knew getting our bosses to understand was a lost cause, so she took things into her own hands. And boy, what a power play it was."

She may have managed to ease tensions by forcing the army to pull back. However, that was ultimately just a temporary solution.

So, what are you planning now, princess? What's your next move...

It occurred to him that he was taking pleasure in — even looking forward to — Mia's plans, and he couldn't help but laugh at himself.

"And that's why it's up to you two," he said to the guards. "You get what I mean?"

"Huh?"

“Everything Her Highness has done will all be for naught if you two go blabbing about how the Lulus tried to shoot her with an arrow. If His Majesty hears about it, you think he’s going to let that slide? Why do you think she told you to keep quiet about what happened in the forest? It’s critical that no one finds out.”

“I... I get it now! My lips are sealed!”

The two guards saluted him. He looked from one to the other, then sighed.

Bloody hell... Why am I of all people going around defending the princess?

Just then, he remembered the young official who was always by her side. Given how quickly Mia’s mind worked, it seemed likely that she often neglected to fully explain her thoughts to her aides. Those who assisted her — the wiser, the worse for wear, probably — must have it pretty rough. Figuring it must be hell for that fellow with the glasses, he raised his mug in a silent salute. His lips curled into a grin.

Cheers, you poor bastard. I’m sure glad we’re not in the same boat.

As he downed the rest of his ale and savored the sweet taste of schadenfreude...

“Captain Dion, may I have a moment with you?”

...The man whom he’d just toasted appeared behind him. Suddenly, he had a very bad feeling, as if his metaphorical boat was looking suspiciously similar to someone else’s. Something told him the man he just mocked might not be the only poor bastard in this tavern...

By the time Mia arrived at the viscounty town, she’d fallen into a comfortable stupor of triumphant exhaustion.

Ahh, I want a bed. Being in bed sounds terribly appealing right now.

Of course, she couldn’t afford to fall asleep right away. First, she had to remind Dion and the three others who were with her in the forest to keep quiet about what had happened.

I can’t have people finding out I threw a tantrum and took it out on a tree for tripping me.

Literally *no one* would be surprised to hear of her doing something like that, but this time Mia actually found her own actions rather embarrassing. Getting angry at a tree for tripping her and making a scene was bad enough, but she’d almost earned herself an arrow in the head for it. That thought alone was enough

to make her squeal in shame.

Mia wasn't shameless. Her sense of shame was just a little weird.

Upon returning to the Berman manor, she immediately agreed to an audience with the viscount. Normally, as the princess, she would be under no obligation to do so, but she just so happened to have something to say to him as well.

"Your Highness, what is the meaning of this? You can't just do something like that... That place is dangerous. If there was any confusion, things could have..."

In the middle of the large guest room was Berman, who was waiting for her with an expression of great displeasure.

"Oh? Are you proposing, then, that a mere handful of men would have been sufficient to ensure my safety? Knowing the area is dangerous — as you said yourself — you would have me return with no more than two of my guards?"

"I... W-Well, no, that's not... What I mean is that it's a problem for Your Highness to have gone to such a dangerous place without informing me..."

"All the empire's lands are the imperial family's lands. As the emperor's daughter, if it is my wish, there is nowhere I cannot go and no one who can stop me. Am I wrong?"

Mia presented an impeccable image of the arrogant, selfish princess. After all, she had plenty of experience. In the previous timeline, that had been her modus operandi.

My, this reminds me of the good old days. How refreshingly thrilling this feels!

It had been a long time since she'd had a chance to work the Mia Specialty on someone, and she glowed with delight.

"Ah, that reminds me. I have developed an interest in those forested lands, and I wish to discuss it with Father. I will need you to refrain from any clearing or military operations in the meantime."

"Nonse— Uh, I mean, beg your pardon, but that is much too dangerous. Without the army in the area, how will we keep those vicious tribesmen from committing any atrocities?"

"I see no reason to worry so long as this town is sufficiently fortified. If something were to happen to the villages nearby, well... Just leave them to sort it out for themselves. Why concern yourself with such petty matters?"

She tilted her head to the side and held her hands out in a perplexed fashion. Her lips, however, were curled up ever so slightly in a devious grin. What she'd described was exactly how the Viscount would normally solve this himself. It was also the prevailing attitude of the majority of nobles. To refute that would be to go against the norm, thus revealing he had some undisclosed interest in the matter. He had no choice but to remain quiet.

"Well then. I believe that settles that. I trust you'll make the necessary arrangements."

With that, Mia tugged at the hem of her shorts in a perfunctory curtsy, and left the room.

Only after concluding her talk with the Viscount and returning to her guest chamber did Mia come to an important realization.

"Hm? Milady, where is your hairpin?" asked Anne as she was helping her change.

Mia's hand shot to the side of her head, where she felt nothing but her own hair.

"My, how odd... It's not there, is it?"

She hadn't taken off any clothes since returning to the viscounty town, and she certainly hadn't had any time to change when she was in the garrison. She also had no recollection of ever taking the hairpin itself off. Scratching her head, she slowly sorted through her memories of the day until one particular scene made her go pale.

That's it... That must be when it happened... It came out when they shot those arrows at me...

She also could have lost it when she tripped over the tree, but either way, the hairpin was currently in the middle of that forest.

U-U-Uh oh... That's not good!

Mia began to panic. She was pretty sure she'd managed to prevent the conflict that would have broken out here. However, that hairpin had come from the forest... Which meant it was inextricably connected to this whole event. Losing something like that seemed like a terrible omen. The situation was still strained, and the slightest thing could reignite the conflict. Soon the wildfire of revolution would consume her. What lay down that path, she knew well. The swoosh of a falling blade, and the thud of a severed head...

N-No way... I refuse to go through that again!

There was also another motive behind her desire to retrieve the hairpin. She wanted it back for the sake of that child who'd given it to her. Had it been a regular present, she wouldn't have cared as much, but she couldn't simply put it out of her mind knowing it was his late mother's keepsake. He'd given her something terribly precious, and he'd undoubtedly be saddened if he found out that she'd lost it. While she definitely didn't want to make the child mad at her, even if he didn't feel any anger the thought of disappointing or discouraging him didn't sit well with her.

Nothing good comes of treating kindness with contempt.

With her mind made up, she knew what she had to do.

"I have to go and find it. I need it back."

"Milady? What do you mean?"

"Anne, could you please ask Ludwig to attend me?"

Chapter 11: Ludwig the Talent Scout

"I apologize for troubling you to come here at such an hour, Captain Dion."

"Not at all, Your Highness. As common soldiers, it is our duty to obey your wishes, no matter the time or place."

Dion lowered himself to one knee and bowed his head to the princess who'd saved the lives of his men. It was, for him, a rare display of respect, but the cynical air he always carried about him made it seem just short of fully sincere.

"I-Is that so? Well, all right then. It's a little creepy to hear that from you, but..." She shifted uncomfortably in her seat and leaning warily away from him before clearing her throat. "Anyway. There's something I need to do, and I'd like to ask for your help."

After hearing her explain her intentions, he frowned.

"You want to go back to the forest... to find your hairpin?"

Is it really valuable or something? So far, she hasn't seemed like the kind of person to get hung up about stuff like that, though... Maybe it's a present from someone special?

Despite postulating a number of possibilities in his head, her ensuing answer only confused him further.

"...It's something you received from a beggar child?"

Sure, it might be an heirloom from the kid's mother, but he couldn't understand why she wanted it back badly enough that she'd go all the way back to the forest.

"I'm aware that it's a selfish request, and you may have reservations..."

"Sure. Let's go, I don't mind."

"...Eh?"

"Your Highness did me a great favor by creating an opportunity for me to withdraw the troops. The least I can do is indulge a couple of selfish requests."

Besides, there's more to it than just selfishness, right?

Though he left the latter part unsaid, he displayed no hesitation in agreeing to her request.

“That said, I can’t move the troops, so if you don’t mind, I’ll bring you there myself.”

“Y-You mean... Just the two of us?!” Mia’s face went a few shades whiter before she managed to squeeze out a few more words. “I-I suppose... that will have to do...”

Her voice trembled as if she were on the verge of tears.

“Captain Dion.”

A voice stopped Dion as he stepped out of the room.

“Ah, Mr. Ludwig.”

He looked over to discover Mia’s close aide waiting for him.

“If I could also ask you a favor... Please do everything in your power to ensure Her Highness returns safely. The empire *needs* her. Both now... and in the future.”

“As you wish. I’m a man who pays his debts, and I owe Her Highness a big one. I’ll try my best.” He casually saluted Ludwig and turned to go.

“One more thing. If I could make just one more request...”

Dion stopped and glanced back, seeing a sense of resolve in Ludwig’s eyes. Dion tensed.

“Yes? What else can I do for you, Mr. Ludwig?”

“Once this incident is fully concluded, I’d like you to join our cause and become one of Her Highness’s allies.”

“Join your cause, you say? Those aren’t words to throw around lightly. I was under the impression that your dear princess isn’t very fond of me, but...”

Considering this invitation was coming from one of her most trusted aides, he must have misjudged what she thought of him.

“Also, you’re not giving me much to work with here. What exactly is this going to entail? Am I supposed to join the imperial guards and do the whole serve and protect thing? Not that I wouldn’t, mind you. Hell, that doesn’t sound half bad.”

“That is indeed a tempting proposal. Considering your skill with the sword, Her Highness will probably be safer with you than any other guard. But,” he continued with a shake of his head, “that’s not it.”

Even Dion wasn’t ready for what he said next.

“My request... is for you to become a general.”

“Huh? You want me to do what? A general? You mean of the army?” He stared at Ludwig in shock.

“You see, I have strings I can pull in the Golden Moon Ministry and other departments that handle domestic affairs. But I have no connections in the Ebony Moon Ministry, and therefore, no influence over military affairs. In order for Her Highness to do as she plans, she’ll need more than just office types like me. She needs allies in the military, and not just any allies. She needs someone who both understands what she’s working towards and has the capability to help her get there.”

“So you want me to claw my way to the top and help her from there?”

What Ludwig was asking of him was arguably even tougher than putting his life on the line to protect Mia as an imperial guard. For someone like him, who had no desire for titles or prestige, politics was nothing but a pain. Promotions were the last thing he was interested in.

“You know, that sounds like... it might be fun.”

Which was why he was surprised to hear the words that came out of his own mouth. However, the more he thought about it, the less strange it seemed. For soldiers, putting their lives on the line was part and parcel of the job. If he was going to die in the line of duty, it did seem better to do so serving Mia than to get sent to his death under the braindead orders of some noble.

“Either way, that’s all just wishful thinking. There’s no guarantee we’re even going to make it out of that forest alive, never mind resolving this conflict peacef— What’s so funny?”

He cocked an eyebrow at Ludwig, who was chuckling at him.

“Oh, don’t mind me. I just find all this rather amusing.”

“What? You think I’m wasting my time worrying because you’re sure that Her Highness’ll find a way to fix this mess?”

“That’s part of it, yes, but what I find most amusing is that you, Captain Dion, seem to think so as well.”

Dion froze. Slowly, he looked down at his hand, which rested on the hilt of his sword. It was true that he wasn’t actually worried, but he’d thought it was because of his confidence in his own ability.

Was I also thinking that so long as I leave it to the princess, things will turn out okay?

He snorted. The thought was both amusing and terribly vexing.

The secret talks that took place this evening would later become a renowned piece of history, appearing in numerous

textbooks and papers. They featured two prominent characters. The first was the famed chancellor Ludwig, who would eventually come to be known as one of Mia's Band of Four. The second — also one of the Four — was the great general Dion Alaia. As both allies and friends, the two men devoted themselves to Mia's cause. The bond they shared was forged through a lifetime of shared adversity, but it all began on that fateful night of secret talks.

Chapter 12: A Teary-Eyed Mia is Helpless and Alone

The Lulus were a tribe about two hundred strong who lived in a secluded village in the Sealence Forest, which in the previous timeline was known to be the stage of a great tragedy. Muted whispers passed from ear to ear, lamenting the destruction that the princess's selfishness wreaked upon the village. What the rumors failed to convey, however, was the sheer brutality of the massacre that had taken place. After suffering heavy casualties at the hands of skilled Lulu archers, the imperial army moved to quell the unrest for good by burning down the forest and slaughtering the entire tribe.

The only Lulus who survived the carnage weren't there to begin with; they were migrants and travelers who had left their village to find work. Dotted throughout the Empire, their grief and rage drove them into the waiting arms of the burgeoning revolutionary army, where their expert sharpshooting made them deadly weapons — to the bloody dismay of countless imperial soldiers.

Ultimately, the Lulu village would be remembered as a tragic breeding ground of hatred, where a brutal massacre etched bitter vengeance in the hearts of countless souls.

But that was then. At the present moment it was all quiet on the Lulu front. Nevertheless, the tribe's warriors all wore grim expressions as they waited. They could feel the tension thickening the air. It was a tenuous peace, the calm before a storm, and they knew it would not last. The stifling silence was ultimately broken by a message from a frontline scout.

"The imperial soldiers... retreated?"

The chieftain's voice came out as a low, raspy croak.

"It must be a trap. They're trying to lure us out," suggested one of the warriors.

"That's very possible," replied the scout, who then frowned. "But even so... Their camp is completely empty, and their

provisions remain untouched. It's all very bizarre."

The scout was no clueless youngster. They stood on the brink of war, the fate of their entire tribe hanging in the balance, and he was someone they trusted to act as a frontline sentry during such dire times. A simple attempt at ambush would hardly escape his notice.

"In any case, we hold our ground until we know more," said the chieftain in a heavy voice. He crossed his arms and stroked his long beard before turning to the young girl beside him.

"I'm sorry to have made you come all this way only to run into something like this. I was hoping to ask you to pass the outcount's message on to the imperial army's captain, but..."

"I don't mind. When the tribe is in danger, it's only natural to come help..." The young girl nodded, her expression strong but solemn. "I was thinking of asking Miss Tiona to talk to some of the higher people and ask them to mediate a peaceful solution..."

"Asking higher-ups, huh... Depending on how things go, we might indeed have to consider such an option... but alas, I fear the Outland Count of Rudolvon is a rare exception. I doubt any other nobles are *noble* enough to help us."

At the end of the day, the Lulus were merely a single tribe of people occupying a section of forest near the border. The empire's nobility had no reason to help them. The chieftain shook his head. He'd lived long enough to know how the gentry viewed them. However...

"You're being too pessimistic, Chief," said the girl. "There are good, respectable nobles too. Besides—"

"Excuse me! Chief! A girl who came into the forest dropped this."

"What's tha— Hm?! That hairpin... It's..."

Upon seeing the item in the sentry's hand, a deep crease appeared across the chieftain's brow.

U-Ugh... How did it come to this...

Mia was stiff as a board as she sat atop her horse, its plodding steps bouncing her up and down. She looked up at the tall, slender figure sitting right in front of her and felt her muscles tense even more. Due to the purported dangers of being on horseback at night, she was now stuck riding tandem with Dion. It was just her and him and the great outdoors. Which was absolutely terrifying.

Also, he'd told her to hold on tight, but she didn't know where or what to hold on *to*, and she was scared of grabbing on to the wrong place and making him mad, so she did the only thing she could think of: freeze and hope she didn't fall off.

"We're going to stop by the camp along the way, Your Highness."

"The camp? Why?"

"Because we need to stock up on some torches, obviously. Or were you intending to go look for something in the forest at night in complete darkness?" He let out a sigh of what sounded uncomfortably like extreme exasperation. "You know, when it comes down to it, you can really botch the landing sometimes, Your Highness. You gotta work on your confidence game."

Botch the landing? Whatever does he mean?

"The whole premise just doesn't work. It's so amateur. You have to go look for something in the middle of the night? Come on. What kind of reason is that? You might have tricked my vice-captain into believing you, but..."

Dion looked over his shoulder at her. When she tilted her head quizzically, he rolled his eyes.

"All right, you can drop the act now. I assume you're going to go meet the tribe directly and talk it out with them in person?"

"...Huh?"

"Oh? Am I wrong? Considering you'd so graciously interrupted my plans to sit back and relax with a good cup of wine, after a rather taxing day, and pulled me all the way out here, I thought I could expect at least that much from you. Hm?"

Suddenly, she could feel a tangible pressure emanating from him. Something cold and frosty shot up her spine, and she rushed to answer.

"O-O-Of course! Not, I mean! You're not wrong, of course! And I'm going to need your help!"

"Good. As I thought, you're an interesting one, Your Highness!" He chuckled in amusement, and the pressure dissipated.

"Anyway, I don't know what exactly you're planning to do, but I'll be with you the whole way. Even if this ride takes us straight to Hell."

She looked at him, and the expression on his face made her realize something. It was one of those realizations that really should have come earlier but was nevertheless better late than never.

My? Is this... going to be dangerous? Am I... in trouble?

Scenes of her previous life flashed across her mind, ending with the moment when she'd been killed by the very man who was currently sitting in front of her.

W-Wait a minute! What in the moons have I gotten myself into?!

She'd let her guard down. That was it, plain and simple. After pulling back the troops, she'd thought she'd solved everything. Going to find the hairpin was supposed to be nothing more than a precaution. Her relief had dulled her senses, blinding her to the danger of her situation.

I-I know what this is. This is like when the appetizer is really tasty and you eat too much of it and you get really full and you end up missing the whole point of the meal, which is the really good dessert... Gah! Come on, focus! This is not the time to be coming up with such poetic metaphors!

It was, of course, neither poetic nor a metaphor, but its discombobulated nature was a decent analogy for the confused state of her mind.

"This place... really is dark."

At night the Sealence Forest was submerged in a deep, suffocating darkness. Dion walked in front of her, and though the torch in his hand burned brightly, it illuminated little more than a small circle around them. The place looked nothing like how it had during the day. The way the forest seemed to have morphed into a different world left her on edge, which meant that any sudden noises such as...

"Your Highness."

"Eeek!"

...someone speaking to her was enough to make her jump.

"Wh-Wh-What is it?!"

"Oh, not much. I just thought I'd point out that we've reached the place where we were attacked during the day," said Dion with a smile that suggested he was enjoying this far too much.

"A-Ah, I see... Okay then." She looked around and scratched her head. "Are... you sure this is the place?"

"Very sure. Look, the mark's still on that tree from where the arrow hit it."

She peered at something on the bark that, now that he mentioned it, did sort of look like the kind of mark an arrow would

leave, but...

I can't really be sure. More importantly, how am I supposed to find anything in a place like this?

The realization had come far too late. If she asked Dion to take her back now, he'd just roll his eyes at her. And that was assuming she was lucky. If she somehow rubbed him the wrong way, she'd be in a load of trouble. After all, she was dealing with the person who had literally killed her before. Anything that might anger him was a big no-no...

Just as she started scanning the ground in an attempt to find her hairpin, she heard Dion's voice.

"Your Highness, it seems like things are going according to your plan."

"...Eh?"

She gave him a blank, clueless stare.

"Hey, how about you come out instead of eyeing us like a bunch of peepers?" he shouted as he pointed his torch toward some thickets.

Soon after there was the sound of something brushing against the leaves, and a number of mean-looking men appeared. They all wore pelts over their lean, muscular bodies.

So that's what the Lulus look like? I wonder if any of them are related to Liora.

She gazed at them dazedly as the conversation continued without her input.

"Considering I wasn't greeted by a flurry of arrows, I assume you're not here to fight."

"Impressive... Leader of the empire's warriors, you have good insight."

The warriors parted as an older man with an impressive gray beard stepped through. The man fixed Dion with a scrutinizing glare. Then he shifted his sharp gaze to Mia.

"Girl..." he said with a noticeable accent. "You are person... Who came here during day, yes?"

Unprepared for the conversation to suddenly involve her, she blinked blankly at him a few times. Then, figuring it would do her no good to lie, she nodded.

"That's right. I was—"

"Girl... Where you get this?" the man asked in a low growl.

In his hand, he held the very thing Mia had been looking for —

the unicorn hairpin.

"My, that's..."

"Answer me... Where you get this? I warn you... Say wrong thing and I will—"

"All right, I think that'll be quite enough," interjected Dion as he stepped forward. "Watch your tongue, old man. Before you stands Her Highness, Princess of the Tearmoon Empire, so I'd suggest you start minding your manners. Also, I'm technically responsible for her safety, so..." His hand moved to the hilt of his sword and his voice took on an edge. "I'm gonna have to warn you. Say the wrong thing, and I might have to stop playing nice."

"You! You..."

The air thickened immediately with tension as the two men glared daggers at one another. Teeth were bared and nerves were taut. In an instant, the situation had turned dangerously volatile.

Ahh... This is...

Mia, meanwhile, was shaking...

This is sublime! What pleasure... What bliss!

...from absolute delight. She was having a *moment*. In fact, she was getting so emotional that tears were welling up in her eyes. And who could blame her? Dion — the man who had killed her and was *possibly* her greatest foe — was stepping into the line of fire. For her. *Dion* was risking his life to protect *her*. It was nothing short of pure, unadulterated ecstasy. Gratification of the greatest degree.

Ahhh, this is it! I know this feeling! It's the same as when I won Ludwig over! This feels absolutely glorious!

She had to stop herself from breaking into a fit of *Ohohos*.

"By the way, Your Highness... I assume you know how you're going to handle this, right?"

"...Eh?"

It didn't take long for him to rain on her parade.

"Uh..."

"Assuming you've already planned for a situation like this, you wanna start talking? Am I allowed to kill them or not? Is it going to be fight or flight? I'd appreciate some direction about how to proceed."

He gave her another one of his signature way-too-friendly smiles. By now, she knew exactly what it meant — you'd better know what you're doing or you're going to regret it big time — and it made her pale.

Okay, this is no time to be feeling good! I need solutions! What should I do...

She thought and thought, but having come here without the slightest semblance of a plan, nothing came to mind. Furthermore, there were a couple of very angry Lulu men staring at her, and it was making her very uncomfortable. She had no idea *why* they were angry at her, but it certainly seemed like getting out of this without some bloodshed was going to be difficult. Even worse was the fact that on second thought, Dion wasn't exactly a staunch ally of hers either. He wasn't her friend, and he hadn't sworn loyalty to her. His assistance was very much conditional, and with that intimidating aura of his, he felt like an enemy himself half the time.

Which means... My, that's rather odd. There's... nobody on my side?

She had no guards with her. Her loyal subjects, Anne and Ludwig, who normally rushed to her aid, weren't here. Alone and helpless and surrounded by foes, she was completely by herself. She grew desperate as the reality of her situation fully dawned on her, and her vision began to cloud with tears.

I need... I need to think of something...

As she spiraled deeper and deeper into panic, help appeared in the most unexpected way.

"Please... Wait!"

"Hm? Who might that be— Liora?!"

The sudden appearance of a familiar face caused Mia to let out a yelp of surprise.

"Your Highness... It is an honor," said Liora with a bow.

Mia gave her a quizzical look.

"What are you doing in a place like this? Actually, never mind... Could you perhaps tell me why the gentleman there seems so upset?"

"Of course... Actually... He is the Lulu Tribe Chieftain... and..."

"This hairpin..." said the chieftain, who inserted himself into the conversation. "Give my wife as gift... Then, after wife die... Give to daughter."

"Your daughter, you say..."

Mia pondered his words for a few seconds before nodding with comprehension.

"I see... In that case, I'm terribly sorry to inform you that your daughter has unfortunately passed away."

“Passed... away?”

The chieftain mouthed the words in disbelief. His lips quivered a little. Seeing his shock, Mia slowed her speech and used as gentle a tone as possible to avoid any undesired provocation.

“I believe that hairpin was probably given to me by your grandson.”

“Tell me... Tell me more.”

Mia told her story to a silent, attentive audience. Even after she finished, no one spoke. The Lulus traded glances, each trying to assess the veracity of the story through the expressions on one another’s faces. Eventually, Liora broke the silence.

“Chief... Her Highness is not a person who lies... What she told us... matches the character of the princess I know.”

Even Dion pitched in with a comment.

“Not that it matters, but just so you know, Her Crafty Highness there was the one who made it so we could pull back our troops.”

“What? Lies. The girl kick our tree... Nothing more,” protested one of the warriors.

Dion silenced the man with a glare before continuing.

“Here’s a little lesson for you about how militaries work. Armies, you see, need to have valid reasons to move, and that applies to retreating as well. I wouldn’t expect such understanding from a simple foot soldier, but you,” he said with a testing gaze at the chieftain, “must surely understand, O Commander of the Lulu forces.”

The old man’s expression hardened, but he replied in a gruff voice, “I do... But you must know too... Believing all your words... Is difficult.”

It was here that Mia saw a chance to nudge the conversation in the direction she wanted: creating an excuse for her to get out of here. She jumped on the opportunity.

“You’re very right. In that case, we should bring the boy here. I doubt keeping him in the slums will do him any good in the future anyway. In fact, I’ll arrange for it to be done right away. You can make up your mind after you see him.”

She turned around and, feeling that the matter was settled, made to leave. She managed barely three steps before she heard Dion’s interrogative voice behind her.

“Hold on there, Your Highness. Why’re you leaving? You can’t

possibly be done, right?"

"...Eh?"

"Weren't you going to put an end to this whole conflict over the forest? I'm still waiting to see your master plan unfold."

He gave her that classic Dion smile, and the color drained from her face, again.

"O-Of course. How terribly convenient that a representative from the Outland Count of Rudolvon is here in the form of Liora. I'm sure we're all very excited to hear what she has to say!" she said, desperately grasping at anything that made it seem like she wasn't completely clueless and on the verge of a nervous breakdown.

After everyone had their say, Mia was finally allowed to go, but, right as she was about to, the chieftain approached her by himself.

"Your Highness... I apologize for earlier."

"Oh? Didn't you say you had difficulty believing me?" she asked, frowning at the chieftain's oddly humble attitude.

"The others were there... In front of tribesmen... I must say those things," he said in an earnest tone. "You come to enemy lands... With only one other... You are person of courage... No liar."

He bowed deeply at the waist. His long, gray beard dangled freely down from his chin.

"Thank you for care of my grandson... I apologize for rude words earlier."

The Lulus were a tribe that greatly valued a sense of pride. Those who affronted them would be met in kind, regardless of the offender's rank or status. Mia, however, was someone who'd helped them. On top of that, she was Princess of the mighty Empire of Tearmoon. She had the power to wipe their village off the map on a whim, and yet, she approached them in good faith and treated them with the utmost respect.

They therefore had no reason to antagonize her. In fact, not affording her an equal amount of respect would surely be an affront to her pride. All things considered, the chieftain had decided that it would be best to pay proper obeisance, even if only in private. To his surprise...

"You don't need to apologize. I'm aware that these trees are treasured by your people, and it was rude of me to kick one of

them. We're one for one now, so how about we call it even?" She smiled at him. It was such a blithe smile, as if such concerns about pride and respect were entirely trivial to her. "More importantly, please welcome your grandson with gentle arms."

His jaw tightened. He knew exactly what she was trying to say with her final sentence, and it hit him with the force of a hammer, sending him on a quick mental journey back through his life. He saw his younger self, bound from head to toe by the heavy chains of his pride and stubbornness as chieftain. He saw how it weighed him down, roughened his disposition, and put him at odds with his daughter. There was fighting. There were tears. Then, there was the end. And the long, unwaning regret over a fractured relationship that could never be mended.

He looked the young princess in the eye and heard her unspoken words. *Don't make the same mistake with your grandson*. He understood her, and he pressed his lips together to keep them still. After a long moment, he swallowed and said in a hoarse, labored voice, "I am deeply grateful... For your kind words, Your Highness."

His very soul trembled at the vast empathy of the young girl before him.

...Of course, as you all must know by now, Mia's words were not born of empathy. They came from a very different place.

If that kid is the grandson of the Lulu chieftain, then it's going to be a problem if I leave him in the orphanage.

Though things had certainly improved, the slums were still the slums. You never knew what might happen in a place like that. And if something did actually happen, the Lulus all over the land were going to raise absolute hell. It was best to stamp out any seedlings of danger before they sprouted into actual trouble.

The best solution is to bring that kid back to this forest, but I need him to stay here. For that, I need the chieftain to treat him nicely so he won't throw a fit about wanting to go back to the orphanage...

Her motto had always been Mia First, and she was sticking to it. Sadly, no one at the scene was aware that the ostensible compassion of her words had actually originated from the good old Mia-centric model of the universe.

Chapter 13: Mia's Honey-Laced Request

By the time Mia left the forest and arrived back at the manor, the morning sun had already cleared the horizon. What followed was a whirlwind of activity in which she quickly gathered her things, assembled her men, and gave orders to depart for the capital immediately, all while pointedly ignoring the questions of a bewildered Viscount Berman. When concerned guards asked her to get some rest first, she waved them away claiming she'd have plenty of time to sleep in the carriage on the way back.

"Speed is the essence of war, huh... I see it's not only soldiers who value haste, but sages as well. Princess Mia, ever the tactician," remarked Dion, letting out an affected sigh as he watched her rush about.

After showing up to the game, playing her cards, and setting the stage, she left the table. She accurately identified that her business here was done and her fight now lay elsewhere. Her actions were guided by an acute awareness of where she was most needed and what was most required of her. That, he mused, was probably her underlying logic.

"All according to plan, huh. A real mastermind. That said, she sure squeals a lot for a cold, calculating sort. Makes you really believe she's quivering in her boots sometimes, but I guess that's all part of the act."

A child she'd rescued in the past *just happened* to be the grandson of a hostile tribe's chieftain? What were the chances of that being pure coincidence? While he doubted she'd known when she first helped him, he was almost certain that by the time she was heading to the forest, she had been fully aware of the facts. She had probably done some preemptive digging.

"The Great Sage of the Empire..."

Ludwig's words echoed in his mind.

"Promotions, huh... Bloody hell, army politics is the last thing I

want to get involved in, but if it's for that princess... I might be willing to give it a try."

The cruel irony of his budding motivation to devote himself to Mia's cause was, of course, lost on him. After all, Mia had no idea what "speed is the essence of war" even meant, and it certainly wasn't haste that she valued — it was plain old safety. She just wanted to get out of danger, which meant running away from the forest, and more importantly, from *him.* The only thing that had been on her mind as she made her escape was *I need to get out of here! Between the conflict and him, this place is dangerous enough to kill me a hundred times over!*

Upon returning to the capital, Mia immediately sent a messenger to the New Moon District and arranged for the child in question to be transported from the orphanage to the Sealence Forest. In order to ensure everything went smoothly she even handpicked the guards who would escort him, selecting only the most experienced men for the job. As she rushed to get things done, she was summoned by her father, the emperor.

"Father wants to see me? In the audience chamber of all places? I wonder why..."

In general, the Emperors of Tearmoon and their family members were close. In some nations rulers were hailed as divine, untouchable beings and even their immediate family had to request a formal audience in order to see them. In Tearmoon, however, such attitudes of sacrosanctity had never been adopted. If anything, Mia wished her father would stop coming to see her at every possible opportunity. He could be so terribly annoying at times.

Consequently, it was very unusual for him to summon her to a formal location like the audience chamber. Upon seeing the people gathered there, though, the reason became clear. In addition to her father, the emperor, and her trusted aide, Ludwig, there was a third figure who was arguably the most central character of the events that had recently transpired: Viscount Berman.

"Ohhh, my dear daughter Mia!"

"It is a pleasure to see you, Your Majesty. I have come according to your summons."

She held her skirt and gracefully curtsied... which prompted the emperor to launch into a fierce tirade!

"No no no! Not 'Your Majesty'! I told you to stop calling me

that. It sounds so dreadfully distant and it makes me sad. You must be more casual. Call me something like Father. No, wait. You can go even further. Mmm... 'papa' would be most wonderful..."

"You wished to speak to me, *Father*?"

The Emperor wilted at his daughter's curt reply and hung his head, crestfallen. In case it wasn't clear from that exchange, he was a man of... a most troublesome disposition.

"Fine. I suppose I'll settle for 'Father'... Anyway. Mia, the reason I called you here today is to hear from you regarding your recent visit to Viscount Berman's domain."

Well, no surprise there. I figured as much.

She shot a glance at Berman, who was standing perfectly still. His face seemed a little too pale to be entirely normal. While he was part of the nobility, his domain was exceedingly close to the border, making him — he'd never admit it himself, of course — something of a country bumpkin in the eyes of his fellow nobles. The number of times in his life he'd been granted an audience with the hallowed ruler of Tearmoon, he could count on one hand. That he would be nervous in this situation was entirely understandable.

Well, since he's so busy staring out into space, why don't I just get this over with before he has a chance to snap out of it?

She pursed her lips as the calculating side of her mind began to take the reins. Its rare moment in the spotlight didn't last long, though.

"I heard you went to a very dangerous area of the viscount's lands that's in the midst of violent conflict. I'll have you know that when I heard this news, I almost passed out from the shock."

"My, is that so? How strange. I didn't come across any danger whatsoever," said Mia with an air of nonchalance.

The nonchalance was important. If she somehow suggested that she'd run into actual danger, the emperor might just raze the whole forest to the ground in a fit of rage. Better safe than sorry.

"With all due respect, Your Majesty, Her Highness failed to mention that she has withdrawn all the troops that were stationed near that forest. Surely, I'm not wrong in assuming that this proves something very significant happened there."

My, what a terribly annoying tattletale.

Her eye twitched once in irritation, but she kept her composure. She gave Berman a calm, dismissive look before shaking her head.

"Ah, Viscount, I see that I must swallow my pride and tell the

truth. I did indeed suffer a most embarrassing experience in the forest. I tripped over a tree and became thoroughly flustered. I'm ashamed to admit it, but that's the truth of the matter."

"What?! A mere tree had the nerve to trip my dear daughter?! Vile thing! I'll burn down the whole fore—"

"Please, Father. Calm yourself. I intend to cut down that tree and use it for my hairpin, so there is nothing for you to worry about."

She showed her father a most endearing smile before shifting her gaze toward Berman.

"Speaking of which... Father, I find that I'm rather fond of that forest, and it would make me so very happy if I could claim it for myself. As princess, I'd like to make it an official part of my personal domain."

In a brilliant display of that skill conferred upon all spoiled princesses, she cooed her request in a voice laced with honey.

"Really? Is it that great of a place?" Intrigued, the Emperor leaned forward a little.

"Yes, it's a beautiful forest, and it looks like an absolutely wonderful place for a vacation."

"I see... Well, in that case..."

As Ludwig watched the conversation unfold from the sidelines, he couldn't help but feel a little disappointed.

There's a clear downside to how she's handling this...

It was true that placing the Sealence Forest under the direct jurisdiction of the princess would protect it from further intrusion while simultaneously defusing tensions with the Lulu tribe. In exchange, however, it would earn the bitter animosity of Viscount Berman.

Ludwig was personally of the opinion that Viscount Berman was a man of little value. If anything, he was the kind of rash, frivolous person with whom association was best avoided. Nevertheless, he was a noble, and he was the one charged with ruling that particular stretch of land. The kind of reform Mia was — in Ludwig's mind, at least — trying to enact would necessarily require the support of many people. It was therefore best to minimize the number of people she upset, as every enemy made along the way was not only a new source of opposition but also a potential ally lost. Given the scale of her (supposed) ambitions, she

couldn't afford to push too many people away.

It was of course possible that Mia had decided the Lulu incident was something she needed to set right even if it meant making enemies. It would be the right thing to do, and being determined to uphold justice at all costs was certainly a laudable attitude for the Princess of Tearmoon to possess...

But still, I thought that she... Because it was not anyone else, but her... *That she would be able to present a better solution. An optimal way to solve this conflict that wouldn't hurt her own cause... Has my devotion blinded me to her limits? Have I placed too much faith in her potential?*

That's right. Ludwig was now so far gone that he was feeling disappointed in his own delusions. He was suffering from advanced Mia-phrenia. Mere delusions were no longer enough to satisfy him. No, he was going to need to put delusions in his delusions, and that was just too far down the rabbit hole even for a master of self-deception such as him. The upside to this, however, was that he was on the verge of coming to terms with reality again. The shock of disappointment was about to finally knock the rose-tinted glasses off his face and expose the Mia cult for the sham it really was. He was mere moments away from coming face to face with the cold, merciless truth — that Mia was neither sage nor saint, but only a princess. And a rather pea-brained one at that. He was so close. The fog in his mind was clearing. Just when he was about to have his epiphany...

"In that case, Berman, you shall be tasked with building a castle for Mia beside that forest. In fact, why not expand it into a town as well? It shall be called Princess Town."

The emperor's demand appropriated his mental resources, robbing him of the chance to have his epiphany. As he worked through the implications, he pressed his hand to his forehead.

That's just adding oil to fire, damn it! Why...

Not only was Berman going to lose a chunk of his domain, he had to put up a castle and build a surrounding town.

Yes, I get that ordering him *to do it means the empire won't have to waste its own money, but the man's upset enough already. It's not worth antagonizing him even further.*

He rubbed wearily at his temples and let out a heavy sigh, only for the breath to catch in his throat when he saw the expression on Berman's face.

“Y-Your Majesty… Goodness… I…”

The viscount was visibly trembling, but not from anger. Rather, it seemed like he was close to being moved to tears.

What the… What is happening right now? wondered a wide-eyed Ludwig.

He racked his brains trying to comprehend the baffling scene unfolding before him. Then it happened. He had an epiphany, albeit a different one than discussed previously, and it shook him to the core.

Are you telling me… By God, I get it now… No, but that can’t possibly…

Had they been dealing with a merchant, Mia’s decision would have incurred a great deal of ill will. It would amount to a direct requisition of the merchant’s assets by the empire. He couldn’t refuse a direct order from the emperor, but he certainly wasn’t going to like it.

The difference — and what a crucial difference indeed — was that they were dealing with Viscount Berman, who was not a merchant. He was a noble. And nobles were creatures who valued reputation above all else. Mia’s decision was not a parting of ways with Berman. Far from that, it was a decision born through a perfect understanding of his tendencies, and it offered him exactly that which he wanted most: glory.

Why did Berman even stir up this whole mess to begin with? It was because his feathers were ruffled, making him feel like he had to show up the Outcount of Rudolvon. Mia knew exactly what he craved and by embedding her own special jurisdiction within his domain, she was allowing him to boast that he was building a town bearing the princess’s name. For the gentry, such a feat was glorious beyond measure. After all, if that forest was Mia’s private property, then her father would surely visit from time to time as well. The prestige afforded by that fact alone was worth his trouble.

Am I seeing this right? Did Her Highness just establish permanent protection for the forest at absolutely no cost to herself whatsoever?

Furthermore, by building “Princess Town” beside the forest, she offered the Lulus a path toward prosperity as well. It would serve as an apology for the troubles they’d endured throughout this incident, and while it would be up to them to take advantage of the opportunity, the existence of a town nearby would doubtlessly improve the flow of goods through their lands. Most importantly,

all of this would be accomplished with Berman's gratitude instead of his resentment.

Had it been me, I'd have deposed Berman through political stratagem. Had it been Captain Dion, he'd likely have just eliminated Berman, one way or another.

However, neither of these methods were optimal. Nobles were not just figureheads, they were functional rulers of their lands. They served a pragmatic purpose and were each a crucial gear in the machinery of society. A malfunctioning gear certainly needed to be fixed, but removing it outright would inevitably affect the entire framework. Widespread confusion would follow, and no matter how quickly they installed a successor, there would be unavoidable harm to the people who lived there. A change of ruler would cast a shadow of uncertainty over the land, damaging productivity and stability. How, then, could Mia avoid such consequences? Simple. Don't replace the ruler. Make him work for her instead.

And that's exactly what she did. For her, it just seemed so easy, both to say and to do.

You know what? This probably isn't even the end of it. I bet there's more. She's probably considered how to handle Rudolvon too.

To his utter misfortune, Ludwig's suspicions would be proven correct the next week, robbing him of any chance of recovering from his terminal case of Mia-phrenia when a letter from Tiona, daughter of the Outcount of Rudolvon, was delivered to Mia's room.

Chapter 14: Mia Gets a Good Scolding!

After handling the Berman incident, Mia spent her days lounging around and just generally being very unproductive. There was no school, and the emperor had released her from all her official duties, stating that holidays should be used to relax, so she was in full-on vacation mode.

At present, she was sprawled lazily in bed doing nothing in particular. She wore nothing but her underclothes and was entirely unpresentable. Basking in the privacy of her private chamber, she hadn't even touched her dress since waking up. So long as she could afford to laze around, she was going to do so. Gone was the cool majesty of the Great Sage of the Empire, replaced by the belly-scratching indolence of a girl determined to reach the zenith of unproductivity.

"...Now that I think of it, it's been a while since I've received a letter from Prince Abel," she mused before letting out a sorrowful sigh.

As a matter of fact, that was also a cause of her recent languidness. She'd been exchanging letters with Abel every ten days or so, but recently, there had been a dearth of correspondence. To provide some context, a one-way trip from Tearmoon Empire to the Kingdom of Remno took five days by carriage, so a ten-day turnaround should be considered exceedingly frequent correspondence. With the occasional help of Anne's sister, Elise, she'd already produced more writing than she had in her entire previous life — three whole letters! Hey, it was an accomplishment for her, okay? In fact, she'd already written more letters than she ever could in her previous life. She'd written *three whole letters*. Which definitely said more about how bad of a writer past Mia was than anything else.

Her hopeless career as a writer aside, it was true that Abel's reply was long overdue. The last letter she'd sent had been fifteen days ago. The summer holidays were nearing their end, so she'd soon be able to see him in person, but it nonetheless left her feeling

a little lonely. Not that it was any excuse to roll around in bed all day, but...

"Milady, there's a letter for you..." said Anne, poking her head into the room.

Based on what has been described so far, it shouldn't be hard to imagine why Mia leapt to her feet at the news.

"Well, that took long enough. I was starting to get a little worried that a landslide might have blocked the roads or something... Anyway, I suppose I can forgive a delay of this length."

"U-Um, milady, the letter... It's, um, not from Prince Abel."

"...Eh?"

Mia blinked a few times, a dumb smile still stuck on her face. Anne gave her an apologetic look.

"Actually, it's from the daughter of the Outcount of Rudolvon."

Mia, who had been leaning in closer and closer to Anne, paused. Then she slowly reversed direction and flopped backwards onto her bed.

"Oh. It's from Tiona." She let out a distinctly unenthusiastic breath as her languid disposition returned. "All right, you can open it and read it for me."

It goes without saying that Tiona Rudolvon was not someone she was excited to hear from. In the past timeline, Tiona was one of her archnemeses. While she had no intention of taking revenge, she wasn't about to become pen pals with her either. If only it had been from, at the very least, a friend. Chloe, for example. She would have felt a little happier then.

That said, Outcount Rudolvon's vast stores of wheat were undeniably appealing, and she couldn't afford to ignore a letter from his daughter. With a reluctant yawn, she prepared to listen to what doubtlessly uninteresting things Tiona had to say, only to jump when Anne reprimanded her sharply.

"Milady!"

"Wh-What? Why are you looking at me like that, Anne?"

"I understand that you're disappointed the letter isn't from Prince Abel, but that's no excuse to look like such a mess. Imagine what Prince Abel would think if he saw you like this."

"You don't have to be so mean... It's not like he'll actually see. I'm in my own room..."

Her muttered excuses were cut off by Anne, who proceeded to give her a good scolding.

“You never know who’s watching. Servants and maids have very big mouths, and they’re walking around all the time. Word travels quickly.”

It made Mia recall some scenes from the previous timeline...

Her personal servants had gone around blaming her for all sorts of things, some of which she’d never even done. Anything she actually did wrong quickly became common knowledge in their circles, and it didn’t take long for her to realize they were incessant blabbermouths. If any of them were to tattle to Prince Abel’s messenger about her appalling appearance... The mere thought made her face go pale.

“Ahhh... Anne... Anne...” she whimpered weepily as she shuffled with her hands outstretched toward Anne, who held her and gave a reassuring nod.

“It’s okay, milady. That’s why I personally handle everything. As long as I’m taking care of you, I won’t let anyone else see this room unless it’s neat and tidy. But remember, you never know who might be watching...”

“Okay... I know. I’ll get my act together.”

She held up her fists in a gesture of resolve. After hearing Anne’s lecture, she was now determined to conduct herself appropriately at all times. That way, she would never be embarrassed to be seen by Abel, no matter when or where he should happen upon her. She was a simple girl, but she was honest, and Anne felt a small rush of pride in seeing the earnest attitude of her young mistress.

“That’s all I have to say. I’m sorry for my rude remarks,” Anne said in conclusion.

“No, I should be thanking you. You’re always helping me so much. I don’t know where I’d be without you.”

Normally, scolding one’s master like that was an act of insolence worthy of punishment, but it made Anne happy to know that no matter how lazily Mia behaved, she was still the virtuous princess she had come to respect.

Now properly dressed and seated, Mia began reading Tiona’s letter.

“Hm, Tiona’s... younger brother?”

The words evoked a memory from the past.

Tiona Rudolvon was known as the saint of the revolutionary

army. One of the most significant factors behind her exalted reputation was the fact that she gave her own food to those suffering from famine. As a result, the starving masses, already fed up with the exploitative attitude of the imperial family, quickly gave their support to the revolutionary army she led. This phenomenon was the source of significant distress for Mia, who glowered at the latest report.

"What is the meaning of this?! Ludwig, why in the moons does that woman have so much food to spare?!"

Mia found it all very baffling. No matter how vast the Outcount of Rudolvon's lands were, and no matter how many farmers he had, he couldn't possibly be unaffected when the entire empire was stricken with famine. While he might have saved up some wheat, it seemed unthinkable that he could have enough to share with so many people. Faced with her bewilderment, her last remaining subject let out a disdainful sigh.

"Coming from a member of the imperial family, that is an awfully unlearned question. Your Highness, are you not aware of the development of a new kind of wheat?"

"A new kind of wheat?"

"That is correct. Lady Tiona's young brother, Cyril Rudolvon, developed a strain of wheat that is resistant to the cold. Its yield apparently remains virtually unchanged even through extended periods of unfavorable weather."

"What? When did this happen? Why is this the first time I'm hearing of this?"

"...Well, I suppose I cannot blame you for that. Cyril was taken in by Lady Rafina, and he worked in a research facility in the Holy Principality of Belluga, so it is no surprise you are unaware of his accomplishments. Still, I must say that Lady Rafina is a woman of much foresight. Unlike *someone* I know."

"G-Grrr... That's not fair! She has Prince Sion *and* a brilliant brother? That's so terribly unfair! I want a brilliant brother too!"

She ground her teeth together and seethed in anger, cursing the frank favoritism of fate.

"The child prodigy, Cyril Rudolvon... Not fair... the little brother..." muttered Mia as she relived her past.

"Milady? Is something the matter?"

Mia looked up from the letter.

“I wish to reply immediately. Could you fetch some writing materials for me?”

There was a sharpness to Mia’s gaze that suggested Anne was no longer speaking to a belly-scratching lounger; she was in the presence of the Great Sage of the Empire. She eagerly nodded.

“Oh, and could you notify Ludwig as well? I expect I’ll need some money.”

“Understood.”

Anne did as she was told. She immediately rushed off to relay the message to Ludwig before gathering parchment, quill, and ink. When she returned, she found Mia seated at the edge of her bed grinning to herself.

“You certainly look happy, milady. Did you read something pleasing in the letter after all?”

“Hmm, well...” said Mia as she playfully swung her dangling legs back and forth. “There’s this boy called Cyril, you see, and he’s Tiona’s little brother... He’s very bright, but apparently, financial difficulties are keeping him from going to school.”

“Oh no...”

Anne frowned.

For such an unfortunate story, she sure seems glad to hear about it.

Mia continued to describe the letter’s contents, growing more and more excited as she went. At one point she seemed like she was about to break into song and dance, almost as if she derived profound pleasure from the boy’s misery. This confounded Anne, who had an unshakable faith in the virtuousness of her mistress. Since Mia couldn’t possibly be indulging in schadenfreude, there had to be another explanation. So she proceeded to mull over the possibilities.

Why would she be... Oh, is it because she’s happy that she can help her friend?

Mia was practically compassion incarnate, after all. It didn’t seem much of a stretch to imagine that a saint of saints such as she would be overjoyed to know that she could be of aid.

I bet it’s because she realized there’s something she can do to help Lady Tiona.

Her theory was quickly proven correct.

“And so, in the letter, she asked me if I could put in a good word to Lady Rafina.”

“Lady Rafina... Which means... Ah, she’s requesting your help to

send her brother to study abroad in Belluga."

Rafina was also a close friend of Mia's. Furthermore, the Holy Principality of Belluga was a point of convergence for knowledge, making it an ideal place for studying abroad, as it would provide exposure to all the latest developments in academia. It all made so much sense that Anne was already dipping the quill in ink for Mia to pen her response to Rafina when she heard something that made her freeze.

"Of course, there's no way I'll let that happen."

"M-Milady? Why?" asked an incredulous Anne.

"Because I want him to do his studying here in the empire. In fact, I'll personally see to it that the proper arrangements are made," replied Mia, her eyes gleaming wolfishly.

It wasn't an unreasonable proposition. The empire was no slouch when it came to the quality of its education either, and it had all the other benefits that came with its size and power. That didn't, however, answer a more fundamental question that puzzled Anne.

Why complicate things? Why won't she just let him go to Belluga like he wants?

If this boy named Cyril really was so brilliant, wouldn't it be better to have him grow up in a place like the Holy Principality where he could be surrounded by knowledge? Somehow, it felt like Mia wasn't doing what was best for him. Was her desire to personally help Tiona clouding her judgment? These questions troubled her until she ran into Ludwig, who would not only dispel her doubts but also instill a renewed sense of awe in her for the depth and scale of Mia's endless wisdom.

Thus, delusion met delusion, and each amplified the other, causing their previously linear growths to suddenly turn exponential. Where their runaway fantasies would lead, however, yet remained anybody's guess...

Chapter 15: Fantasies at Full Throttle — Ludwig's, That Is

"Understood. I'll ensure that things proceed as Your Highness wishes."

"I'll leave it in your capable hands then, Ludwig. Have Tiona see— No, actually, it makes more sense for me to go see her. Arrange for my departure as well, then."

Ludwig took his leave with a bow. A few seconds later, he heard footsteps following him out. He turned to find Anne running toward him.

"Mr. Ludwig, do you have a moment?"

"Hm? Sure. What's the matter?" He raised an eyebrow in mild surprise. Anne rarely spoke to him directly.

"Um, this might be a dumb question but... what do you think about, um, what Her Highness said?"

"Ah, well... To put it simply, Her Highness never fails to amaze."

His answer elicited a sigh of relief from Anne.

"Oh, that's good. If you agree with her, that means what she's doing isn't a mistake, right?"

"A mistake? What do you mean?"

"Um, what I mean is..."

She proceeded to explain her worries to a curious Ludwig.

"All right... I understand your concern."

"But it's okay, right? Her Highness... She's doing the right thing, right?"

"I can't say for sure if it's right. I don't know if things will work out as she hopes, nor do I presume to understand all her intentions. However, I do think that it's a sensible thing to do."

"A sensible thing to do?" repeated Anne, perplexed.

"Ah, I see now." Ludwig nodded. "You are of common birth, correct? In that case, I can see why this might not make much sense to you. You see, Lady Tiona and her brother Cyril are, as a matter

of fact, the only children of the Outcount of Rudolvon."

"Mmhm. And? What does that mean?"

"Nobles place a great amount of significance on their heirs. It's rather likely that the Outcount feels some resistance to the prospect of sending both of his precious heirs to a school in a far distant land."

What if Belluga experienced a violent coup? Or suffered an invasion from another kingdom? Or even something more mundane but no less tragic — a fire at the school that took the lives of some of its students?

"If anything like that were to happen, Rudolvon could lose both of his children, both of his heirs, in one go. No noble would wish to risk such an occurrence. Besides, it's not all about school. I suspect he also wants them to learn about their own county."

They likely had much to learn about the land they would one day rule. They needed to know what kinds of people lived there, what the towns and villages looked like, what kinds of industries existed... and how to govern it all and keep everything running smoothly. For nobles, the path of learning was a long one; there was no shortage of knowledge they needed to acquire.

"That's why if there's a way for his son to receive the same quality of education within the empire, he'd surely prefer that option."

"I see... I never knew there was so much to consider."

"Furthermore, one of Her Highness's schoolmates happens to be the daughter of the Forkroads. Considering their company is involved in book distribution, I wouldn't be surprised if she intends to enlist the aid of this schoolmate to gather the necessary materials, which will allow her to build a repository of knowledge that rivals Belluga. Knowing her, she will be mindful of Rudolvon's concerns and ensure his son receives the highest quality of education the empire has to offer."

Now, while Mia did indeed intend to ask Chloe to get her lots of books, it obviously wasn't because she was mindful of Rudolvon's concerns. She wanted one thing and one thing only: cold-resistant wheat. She wasn't being considerate of the nuanced needs of others. Her decision was a calculated move for the sake of her own interests. Ludwig, of course, had managed to spin it into another act of genius through his brilliantly misguided reasoning, causing the Mia Express to race ever faster along the rails of delusion.

Chances are, Ludwig added silently, *this is probably also to balance things out.*

The one who drew the shortest straw in the Sealence Forest incident was the Outcount of Rudolvon. Viscount Berman gained glory. The Lulu tribe gained a path toward economic prosperity. The Outcount of Rudolvon, meanwhile, gained nothing. Not only that, he'd have to give up some of his land. "Not having a violent conflict break out at your front door" was hardly an equal reward. While his friendly relations with the Lulus meant he'd officially state that he was glad to see the conflict resolved peacefully, it was unlikely that he'd be fully satisfied by how things had ended up. This proposal of Mia's, then, was probably a form of compensation.

Which again speaks to the integrity of Her Highness, for it shows that she is not someone who uses compassion as an excuse for incompetence.

Mia was as kind as she was compassionate... and twice as clever. While she was lauded as a saint — and rightly so, for she treasured her friends and cared about her subjects deeply — her concern for her people did not manifest as wasteful spending, and her loyalty toward her friends was not expressed through nepotistic favoritism. Instead, she boldly walked that precarious line between person and politics, balancing her duty toward her friends with the responsibilities of a ruler. A benevolent saint. The Great Sage of the Empire. She was not one or the other. She was both the former and the latter.

That's as much as I can figure out... but I wonder if there's still more. What else might she be after?

Years later, Ludwig would have his mind blown when Cyril Rudolvon developed his signature strain of resilient wheat, but again, that is a story for another time.

Chapter 16: Princess Mia… Wears a Sly Grin

Cyril Rudolvon trusted his sister more than anyone else in the world.

He was a boy whose love for growing flowers and reading books was almost stereotypically contrasted by his ineptitude at all manner of physical activity. While he enjoyed studying, the demands of horse- and swordsmanship placed on him by his father were a burden he struggled to carry. Despite his inadequacies, which left him feeling rather worthless, his sister was unfailingly kind toward him. Time and again, she would offer him a gentle compliment with a comforting pat on the back.

"You're a good learner, Cyril, so when the time comes, make sure you go to school and study properly, okay?"

As such, when he heard that his sister was leaving home to attend Saint-Noel Academy, he couldn't help but worry.

"I wish you were the one going instead of me, honestly," she'd said.

It didn't matter to him. Sure, he enjoyed studying and would love to go if given the chance, but that wasn't the issue. He was worried for her. She was going to a school chock-full of noble bigwigs. Children from prominent families had attitudes to match. What if they bullied her? Following her departure, he prayed night after night that she wouldn't run into trouble. The sight of her waving cheerfully at him upon her return was, therefore, a source of profound relief. Which soon turned into astonishment when she proceeded to tell him about the friends she'd made at school. His jaw dropped at the names that kept popping out of her mouth. Prince Sion of the Kingdom of Sunkland… Princess Mia… These were people who occupied the highest echelons of society, and somehow, *his* sister was friends with them.

"Her Highness Mia Luna Tearmoon, huh…"

Despite his astonishment, she was too lofty a figure for him to

fathom — more a concept than a person. His interest in her had been minimal, limited to a mild curiosity about the conflicting nature of the rumors surrounding her.

I hear people calling her the "selfish princess," and I hear people call her the "Great Sage of the Empire." I wonder which is true...

After learning that the one who resolved the conflict between the Lulu tribe and Viscount Berman was none other than Princess Mia herself, he became a little more intrigued.

"Who would have thought it was possible to end this conflict without bloodshed? Her Highness truly lives up to her reputation."

"But Father, didn't they take some of your land? That's so unfair. Aren't you angry about that?"

"Unfair... is not the right word. Those of the imperial family have the right to do such things. Not that it makes it any better for us, of course..." the outcount said, his tone not nearly as aggrieved as his words suggested. "But in the end, as long as the people don't suffer, then all is well."

Before the Rudolvons had gained their title, they were the leaders of the local farmers. As a result of this experience, they had far more empathy for their people than most nobles did. Add to that their long history of friendly relations with the Lulus, and it was easy to see why they were more than satisfied to see the conflict resolved without anyone getting hurt.

"Huh... Okay..." Cyril nodded, feeling a burgeoning respect for the princess. It wasn't just his father, either. Both his sister and her attendant, Liora, spoke fondly of Mia. The result of hearing so much praise for her was that before he knew it, his image of Mia had grown into a glowing statue of saintly virtue. And now, said statue was apparently coming to pay them a visit.

"So, why is Her Highness coming here?"

His father frowned at the question and scratched his head. He looked to Tiona, who shrugged as well. There was no question that the Rudolvons were a family of poor nobles. Their domain lay in a remote area along the border, and there was nothing here that would pique the interest of a princess so much that she'd make the journey here personally.

"I imagine it's probably something to do with the recent incident in the forest, but..." murmured his father, clearly unconfident in his answer.

His sister, meanwhile, seemed to grasp the situation better,

though her musings also carried a tone of surprise.

"I mean, I know I wrote that letter... but I didn't think she'd actually come..." She smiled. "But I guess that's how she is."

Oh, maybe she's coming because she just wants to see her friend, thought Cyril as he observed his sister's reaction.

Whatever her reason, it had to do with his father and sister. Figuring that the visit had little relevance to him, he headed off to the garden — watering the flowers there was part of his daily routine. Had it been an official visit, every member of the family would have needed to be present to greet her upon arrival, but if it was a personal visit for leisure, he probably didn't have to show up.

Still, I can't believe Tiona is friends with Princess Mia. I mean, I always knew I had a great sister, but she managed to make friends with royalty. Wow... he mused as he looked across the garden at the flowers in bloom.

Taking care of flowers was no simple task. It wasn't enough just to water them. Each flower had to be individually examined. Some might not be getting enough nutrients. Others might be suffering from sickness. Identifying them took a great deal of care. He focused, thoroughly appraising the condition of each delicate blossom. Consequently he didn't notice the presence of another person until he heard a voice from beside him.

"My... What wonderful flowers these are."

He spun around in surprise to discover a young girl standing before him. She was quite pretty. Her hair was lustrous, there was a healthy glow to her skin, and her almond-shaped eyes gleamed with intelligence. He wasn't sure what to say, so he just stood there. She didn't seem to mind. She stepped past him casually, as if he was in no way staring awkwardly at her in stunned silence, bent her knees a little, and gently stroked the petals of a flower.

“These are... Sweetmoons, I believe?”

“Uh, yes, they are.”

Cyril looked the girl over, wondering how he was supposed to address her. The dress she wore wasn’t the elaborate kind preferred by nobles. It was more casual, light and suited to the summer weather. Nevertheless, he couldn’t be entirely certain of her identity. If she were a noble, he should append a “milady,” but doing so toward a commoner would sound strange, if not embarrassingly grandiose. The answer to his question came from her attendant.

“Milady Mia, it’s almost time...”

“Hm? All right, then.”

He looked from the attendant to the girl.

“...Huh?”

Thus did Cyril Rudolvon meet for the first time the woman to whom he would swear his lifelong loyalty.

After leaving the courtyard and stepping into the Rudolvon manor, Mia paused for a moment.

Yes! I did it!

Had she not been in public, she would have thrown her arms up in triumph. She resisted the urge on the grounds of propriety, but she did turn her face down to hide the fact that she failed to stop her lips from curling up into a very wide grin.

Which, had anyone seen, would have been a rather creepy sight to behold.

Rewinding the clock a little...

Ugh... This is terribly unpleasant. I wish I didn’t have to do this.

Upon arriving at the Rudolvon manor, Mia’s mood had hit rock bottom. Though she knew the visit was necessary, she couldn’t bring herself to enjoy it. After all, she was looking at the birthplace of her archnemesis from a previous life, Tiona Rudolvon. She was standing before the enemy’s home base, and she had to walk in. The thought alone made her miserable. She stared at the doors, trying to work up the motivation to walk through.

Nope, not happening. Maybe I’ll go wander around a little and come back and try again when I feel better.

Just as she was about to leave, she noticed out of the corner of her eye the figure of a boy.

My, what an adorable child.

The young boy was watering flowers with a tender, almost effeminate gaze that was sweetly endearing.

"Wait... A boy... and flowers?"

Cyril Rudolvon had created a new strain of wheat. Wheat was a plant. That meant he should be familiar with plants. And... flowers were plants!

The pieces suddenly fell into place.

Trying her best not to let her presence be known, she snuck toward him slowly and silently. She hunched her back, curled her fingers, and carefully walked on the tips of her toes like the Grea— Actually, it was neither great nor sagely. If anything, she looked like she was about to break into somebody's home. Nevertheless, her stealthy approach was successful, and after furtively moving herself into position, she spoke.

"My... What wonderful flowers these are."

She recalled the time master strategist Anne had taught her the Art of Love.

"*You see, milady, men love it when you praise the work that they do.*"

"*Really?! Which means Prince Abel... Hm. What work does Prince Abel do?*"

"*It'd be easier if he had a hobby or two, but I'd probably go with some sort of skill he has. Either horses or swords, I'd say.*"

"*I see. Good idea, Anne. Your advice is indispensable as always.*"

In case anyone forgot, it might be a useful reminder to mention that master strategist Anne had zero experience in relationships, so anything reasonable she said was just dumb luck. Only... she'd hit the jackpot that time.

Men love it when I praise the work they do, which means this Cyril boy will surely be very happy to hear me praise the flowers he grew as well!

Mia proceeded to crouch down beside the flowers...

"These are... Sweetmoons, I believe?"

...And do something thoroughly unscrupulous. Not only did she praise the flowers, she identified them by name, thereby demonstrating that she was well-versed in the subject and had a connoisseur's appreciation of his work. Such underhanded tactics

might offend the sensibilities of a nobler soul, but not Mia! Mia was a pragmatist, and she was going to play dirty!

Mmhmhm, I'm so good at this. I bet I just took his breath away. With a little more luck, that new and improved wheat will be mine! she thought as a sly grin crept across her face.

At Anne's prompting, she rose with a sense of triumph and, after flashing the boy the smuggest of smiles, left the garden.

"We're honored to be graced by your presence, Your Highness. Please make yourself at home. I hope the long journey was not too taxing."

"Not at all. I'm pleased to meet you as well, Outcount Rudolvon." Mia greeted him respectfully and smiled courteously. Her demeanor carried none of the derisive arrogance that so often was used to mock the poor noble.

Hm, I was expecting the same attitude all the young ladies from prominent noble families I've met before have shown, but she doesn't seem to be looking down on me.

He couldn't tell if the princess was sincere, but she was at least following all the traditional protocols of respectful behavior. Even if it was superficial, the effort alone was enough to impress him.

Outcount. Officially, Outland Count. That was the title conferred upon him by the empire. Becoming a count was no small matter, and the title should have commanded a healthy amount of respect among noble circles. However, it was qualified by the preceding term. The addition of "outland" flipped its meaning entirely on its head.

Firstly, it is necessary to point out that this title had not always existed. Its birth was deeply tied to the empire's expansionist policies. Ever since the empire was first created, it had been actively expanding its borders, pushing its influence into lands that had yet to establish any monarchical rule. Sometimes this was accomplished through military force. Other times it was through negotiation and persuasion. Regardless of the method, the goal was the same: to bring more land under the empire's control.

At first, newly claimed territories were given to central nobility to manage. However, the empire's government soon found that there was a great deal of backlash from the people who lived there and quickly changed their approach. In order to reduce resistance, they granted noble titles to locals who formerly held power and had

them rule their lands in the empire's name. This policy proved surprisingly popular, and subsequent annexations proceeded smoothly while avoiding the chaos associated with suddenly changing rulers.

They continued to employ this system of trading noble titles for land, but at one point, they ran into a problem when they tried to incorporate a head chieftain in charge of a number of tribes. These tribes occupied a large piece of land that was also a crucial geographic chokepoint, so the empire desperately wanted to put it under its control. Negotiations were handled by the Jade Moon Ministry who, after taking into consideration the size and importance of the area, promised the head chieftain the title of Count. The offer proved attractive, and the tribal lands were successfully incorporated into the empire.

And that was when the problem arose. The decision was met with a fierce backlash from central nobility.

"How did some country bumpkin turn into a count overnight? This is outrageous!"

Their vehement protests forced the Jade Moon Ministry to reconsider their stance. In order to satisfy the central nobility they had to give out a title lower than count, but reneging on an already-made promise would deal a severe blow to the empire's credibility. In the end, after many high-ranking officials spent many sleepless nights deliberating, they settled on a compromise. Thus was born the title of "Outland Count."

In subsequent talks with the head chieftain they downplayed the qualifier, emphasizing the "count" part of the title. Meanwhile, back home, they openly declared that an outland count was *not* a count, thereby cementing the awkward position the new title occupied in the noble hierarchy. The name was tragically prophetic, and "outland" soon became outcast.

While the rank was supposed to be higher than viscount and lower than count, it was treated with disdain by its peers owing to its origin. Such discriminatory attitudes proved infectious. Eventually, a culture of contempt for outland counts became firmly established, and even lower nobility such as barons could openly mock them without fear of reproval. This created a deep rift between central and outland nobility, resulting in a dangerous situation where tensions had grown to the point where they threatened to divide the empire.

Knowing all this, it should be clear how utterly extraordinary Mia's attitude was. It made such an impression on the Outcount of Rudolvon that he unconsciously straightened his posture in a gesture of respect.

"Please allow me to express my gratitude for the profound kindness you have shown my daughter at the academy."

"Profound kindness? Whatever do you speak of? I recall no such thing."

"I see... But nonetheless, I still owe you my thanks for the recent incident in the Sealence Forest. I do believe it was you who ultimately convinced Viscount Berman to back down. On behalf of both myself and the Lulus—"

"Ah, now that you mention it, I do remember something like that," said Mia with a clap of her hands as though the incident was so minor that it had entirely slipped her mind.

The incident in the forest is so obviously the purpose of this visit, and yet... I see the princess prefers to play her cards close to the chest.

Never in his wildest dreams did Rudolvon imagine that Mia wasn't acting; she actually had forgotten.

"Anyway, let's move to more pressing matters. I've come today to make you an offer," she said, her voice infused with such enthusiasm that she was almost singing.

"...An offer, you say?"

Rudolvon let out a breath and regarded the princess, mentally preparing himself to hear what she had to say.

I know she's here to settle the recent incident in a way that balances Berman's interests with ours. In that case, she shouldn't be making us too bad of an offer...

However, his instincts told him that it wasn't going to be a straightforward offer either. He was, after all, dealing with the Great Sage of the Empire. She probably wasn't going to hand him a few hundred gold with an apology letter and be done with it.

Whatever she proposes, it's probably going to be something I'm not expecting.

Mia, for her part, was completely unaware of the rapidly inflating expectations placed on her, and proceeded to speak in a calm, quiet voice.

Chapter 17: Big Wave Incoming!

"I hear from Miss Tiona that your son Cyril is quite the clever child. She tells me he excels at his studies."

As soon as he heard Mia mention Cyril's name, the Outcount of Rudolvon grasped her intent.

So that's what this is about. Her offer is to...

She probably wished to see Cyril attend school and was willing to put in a good word for him. As compensation for taking a part of his land, it seemed a tad inadequate...

But wait. What if it isn't just any *school? What if...*

After a moment's contemplation, he asked, "Your Highness, forgive me if I've misinterpreted your intentions, but am I correct in assuming that your offer is a personal recommendation for Cyril to attend Saint-Noel Academy?"

A key to the doors of the most esteemed institute of learning on the continent was indeed an extraordinary favor. It would be more than enough redress for the incident.

I've heard that she's friends with the duke's daughter, Rafina. If Tiona had mentioned something to that effect, then it's certainly possible... But.

The wrinkles on his brow deepened, and he pressed his lips together. If that was her proposal, then he'd have to turn her down. He had no intention of sending his son and heir out of the empire. Mia, however, shook her head.

"Allow me to forgive you then, for you have indeed misinterpreted my intentions. I'm not so foolish as to send valuable talent away to foreign kingdoms."

Ever since receiving the letter she'd been thinking over this idea. If Cyril were to attend Saint-Noel, then who would be credited with his accomplishments? Obviously, it would be the academy. Or, worse, people might attribute them to the foresight of the "Lady Saint" of the principality, Rafina. They might even look to the boy's sister, Tiona. Whoever they celebrated, it wasn't going to be the one who merely put in a good word with Rafina to get him through the

door.

That wasn't good enough. What mattered to her was receiving credit. She needed people to think that Cyril Rudolvon's accomplishments were all thanks to her. In order to do that, she'd need to place him under her direct patronage. The problem was that she couldn't simply enroll him in a local school, because Tearmoon just didn't have any learning facilities on par with Saint-Noel. If she sent him to a mediocre school, he might never develop the new strain of wheat, which would be disastrous.

How, then, could she solve this dilemma? After much head scratching, she happened upon a solution.

"If the kind of school I need doesn't exist, then I can just build one myself!"

As soon as the idea came to her, it fell into place with a satisfying click like a much-needed puzzle piece, and suddenly, she saw everything in a completely new light.

"Speaking of which, they were going to build a town for me, weren't they? In that case..."

"Have you heard of Princess Town, which will be built in the Viscounty of Berman?"

Her sudden change of topic caught the outcount off guard, and it took him a few seconds to process what he'd heard.

"Uh, I... Oh, yes, of course."

"I'm thinking of building a school there."

"A school, you say?"

"That's right. Wouldn't it be terribly exciting if a school of Saint-Noel's caliber existed within the empire? Along with a surrounding town to support it?" asked Mia, tossing the idea out as if it were the simplest thing in the world. Then she showed him a toothy smile. "And wouldn't it be even more exciting if Cyril happened to be the first student to attend this school of mine?"

Rudolvon inhaled sharply. His heart sped up.

By putting the forest under her direct jurisdiction, she had prevented any conflict from breaking out. By allowing Viscount Berman to build a town in her name, she appeased his vanity.

And in the midst of all that, she even thought to include our interests in her plans? Us Rudolvons?

Being in a neighboring viscounty, the school would be close to home. Furthermore, in the nearby forest lived the Lulus, with whom

they had close relations. Heck, it was more convenient than even the capital city. Location-wise, it was perfect. The cost of such a project would be enormous, but its name alone — Princess Town — should be enough to attract the attention of many other nobles. Berman would almost certainly receive a great number of donations in exchange for a piece of the glory. And so long as Mia was involved, she would see to it that the project was successful...

At this point, the outcount had developed an appreciation for the princess that cemented his trust in her. He respectfully lowered his head.

"Your care and consideration humble me. My family and I are honored to be blessed by your good will, and though we have little power, we are more than willing to do whatever we can to help."

"Hmm, in that case..."

Mia tilted her head a little and gazed upward, pretending she was considering her choices. Even as she loudly muttered phrases like "Let's see now..." and "What do I need..." to buy herself some thinking time, she was acutely aware of a familiar but long-missed feeling of exhilaration rising up within her.

It's coming, I know it. I can feel it in my gut!

A big wave was coming, and just like last time, she was going to ride its swell as far as it would take her.

"I find myself captivated by the supply of wheat your family keeps in storage."

"Huh? Wheat, you say...?"

"Yes, and I'd like for you to keep storing it. In fact, rather than selling it for cheap, hold on to as much as you can. Then, when a famine strikes..."

"Oh, well, should you wish for our wheat in such a situation, we certainly would not hesitate to supply it to the imperial family. You have my word—"

"No, that's not what I mean."

Mia cut him off. Her instincts told her that what he was suggesting was a very bad idea. That kind of arrangement would lead to the imperial family and central nobility storing wheat only for themselves, leaving the common people to starve. In the end, the angry masses would rise up in revolution, and her story would again come to a quick and head-lopping end.

"I want you to distribute the wheat directly to the masses. And I want you to mention my name while you're doing it..."

Faced with her blatantly vain request, the outcount stared at her, his eyes filled with... Not disdain but deep admiration?!

"...Wait, let me make sure I understand you correctly. You're asking me — in the case that I need to distribute my wheat to the general population — to declare that I'm doing so at the instruction of Your Highness? You are allowing us to use the banner of your name?" Rudolvon asked incredulously. His voice trembled with emotion. It had been a long time since he'd been moved to this degree.

"That's right. Shout it at the top of your lungs if you so wish. Append my name to every bag you give out."

"...I am speechless, Your Highness. You leave me in awe."

The girl before him was the same age as his daughter, and yet held in her petite form was such tremendous wisdom that it took his breath away. The Rudolvons' lands were vast, and most of their people were farmers. This was a well-known fact, and because of it, whenever poor harvests led to food shortages, prominent nobles would come to rob them of their wheat. They would do so under the pretense of gathering provisions for the imperial family, but in reality, they would keep the food for themselves. To them, the hunger of the masses was irrelevant. Why in the world would they give food to commoners when they were at risk of starving themselves? Among much of the high nobility, such logic was simply common sense.

What confounded the moral calculus of their actions was the fact that most of them were not trying to sustain a lifestyle of excess. While the life of any noble would seem lavish to a commoner, they were not hoarding out of a desire for luxury. Why, then, were they so intent on procuring more wheat? Simple. The reason was fear. Nobody knew how long a famine would last. Faced with the risk of starvation, every noble would try to stock up on as much food as possible. The more they had, the greater their buffer. The greater their buffer, the less they'd worry. They sought relief from anxiety, and in the process, burdened their people with suffering of a far more tangible nature.

Still, suffering was suffering, whether mental or physical. To think only of yourself might be immoral, but to fear hunger was only human. So long as they framed their actions as protecting themselves from famine, little could be done to reprimand them.

Now imagine that under such circumstances, instead of offering their provisions to the nobles knocking on their door, the Rudolvons instead gave their food to the masses for free. What would their peers think? They would be furious. Considering the pretense of collecting for the imperial family that they so often employed, such an act could even amount to treason.

And therein lay Mia's genius. She'd instructed him to hold high her banner — to assuage the starving masses under her own name. It would all be carried out as a direct order from the princess.

"It shames me to say this, Your Highness, but I am a timid man, and I must ask if you would be willing to put these instructions of yours in writing."

"In writing? Well, I certainly don't mind. That will indeed put many concerns to rest," said Mia as a figurative question mark floated over her head.

The Outcount's reaction baffled her. After all, what she was proposing was essentially for the Rudolvons to do all the work and for her to snatch all the credit. The offer was so one-sided that even *she* was a little worried she'd gone too far. While she'd put on a calm front, she was actually pretty nervous throughout this whole conversation, wondering if a ticket to higher education would really be enough to convince the Rudolvons to go along with her plan.

It's honestly a little unsettling how eager he is to do this. I wonder if he's got something else up his sleeve... she mused, growing suspicious at the man's strange willingness to accept such a bad trade. She studied him carefully. *Is he trying to win my favor? Maybe he's trying to show how loyal he is so I'll treat him better in the future.*

She craved Cyril Rudolvon's knowledge, but that didn't mean she wanted to be friends with the boy. He was still a Rudolvon, and she still had beef with them. One does not, after all, simply chop off a girl's head and expect her to forget about it.

Trying to butter me up, huh? I see your game, Rudolvon, and it's not going to work. Time for me to put my foot down!

She blew a cocky puff of air out her nose and turned her chin up at the outcount.

"Just so we're clear, this school is not going to be the kind of place prominent nobles usually attend. Cyril is certainly welcome, but he'd better not expect any of the usual extravagance. I'll certainly see to it that its academic quality is on par with Saint-

Noel, but it will be a modest establishment otherwise. I plan to invite all sorts of students, including commoners and those from the neighboring Lulu tribe."

The implication — in her mind, of course — was that she wasn't *that* impressed with his son, and she certainly wasn't sending him to some prestigious academic institution. To her, he and his family were no different from the masses, and she was going to treat them as such. The whole spiel was meant to convey a sort of "know your place, you lowly peasant" vibe.

After hearing Mia's little speech, Rudolvon fell silent. His hand trembled a little.

"I see... Words cannot express the depth of my gratitude, Your Highness," he said, so earnestly moved that tears were welling up in his eyes.

The lengths to which she's willing to go to make sure Cyril can learn in an environment free from the pressures of dealing with prominent central nobility... And she's even going to invite the neighboring Lulus so they can build trust from a young age...

In all honesty, Rudolvon had never liked the imperial family much. Now, though...

Maybe... just maybe... I've finally found the person to whom I should swear my loyalty.

Hot waves of emotion rose up his chest and out his eyes, streaming down his cheeks in crystalline streams of pure, heartfelt joy.

Mia watched him with a kind of eerie fascination — the kind often felt when one knows they should look away but the perversion on display is so mesmerizing that they simply can't.

Sweet moons... I-Is he... one of those people? The kind who... when you're mean to them or hurt them, they feel really good?

Was he... enjoying her disdain? She stared at the man, thoroughly creeped out by the look of pleasure on his face.

W-Well, then again, he is *Tiona's father. I guess I shouldn't be surprised...*

In any case, she'd accomplished what she'd come here for. Cyril Rudolvon was a done deal, and all the Rudolvon's wheat was effectively hers for the taking.

I'm so glad I paid them a direct visit. That was one of the best decisions I've ever made! she thought with a satisfied grin as she leaned back in her seat and enjoyed the soft rocking of the carriage as it carried her back to the capital.

And so, the final piece was put into place, setting the stage for the current of fate to flow abruptly in a new direction...

Chapter 18: Disappearance/Interlude

"Phew... I have to say, after all that, I'm feeling a little tired."

With only a few days of the summer holiday left, Mia returned to her room late at night. She threw herself onto her bed, not even bothering to change out of her dress. It was the kind of behavior that would have earned her a good scolding from Anne, but between propriety and exhaustion, the latter ultimately won out.

After concluding her talks with the Outcount of Rudolvon, she set out on a whirlwind tour through the empire. Inspired by her success with the wheat issue, she decided to get as much done as possible before she left for school. Starting with an in-person inspection of the new hospital in the slums, she then traveled to storehouses to examine food reserves before departing on an ambitious journey in which she circled the whole of the empire, meeting with noble after noble to spread word of the institution she planned to build.

"Ugh..."

Within moments of hitting the bed, a bone-deep exhaustion began to spread throughout her body. It took no small amount of effort, but she resisted its soft embrace and craned her neck up.

"That reminds me... It's been a while since I've checked..."

She let out a deep breath before slowly pushing herself up and shambling toward the luxuriously-designed desk in her room. Stored carefully in the back of one drawer was a bloody diary... which served as an indispensable signpost for Mia. The last time she'd opened it was at the start of the summer. As she took it into her hands, her mouth formed a weary smile.

"...After all that, if this still points me straight toward the guillotine, then I might just cry a little."

She gingerly flipped open the cover and thumbed through the pages until she arrived at the one in question...

"...Huh?!"

...Only to let out a gasp of alarm. She gaped at the page that described her execution as the letters unraveled like loose threads

before melting away into nothing. Simultaneously, the red stains that covered the page faded away. She rubbed her eyes and took another look, only to discover a blank page, pristinely white and completely untouched.

"Wh-What in the moons?! What just happ— Ah!"

In her shock, she allowed the book to slip from her hand. She caught it just before it fell, fumbling it a few times before she got a firm grip on it, only for it to begin emitting a faint glow the color of moonlight. She watched in disbelief as the diary disintegrated into tiny particles of light. Before long, it had disappeared entirely.

"How... It..."

For a long time, she stood there staring blankly at her empty hands, completely unable to process what had just happened.

"Wh-What is the meaning of this?! Why did my diary just..."

In a fit of panic, she ran around her room, looking high and low for her vanished book. She grew more flustered with each passing second. After all, the diary had been her guide. It was a cruel but critical compass for her actions, laying out the path that led her to the guillotine. Without it, how would she figure out which routes to avoid?

"...Hm?"

She froze as a realization hit her. That diary was written by her future self, and it detailed the events that would lead to her bloody death at the guillotine. As long as that future existed, so would the diary.

"Which also means... As long as the diary exists, I'm still destined to die at the guillotine. So... Um... If the diary is gone, then that means..."

Slowly, she worked through the logic, step by laborious step until it formed a clear and unbroken thread that steered her through the labyrinth of her confusion. She followed it to its end, where she arrived at a conclusion.

"Does that mean... the future where I die at the guillotine... is gone too?"

She spoke in a near-silent whisper, mouthing the words as though she couldn't believe what her own voice was saying.

"I... did it? Really? I... did it! Finally! I did it!"

She threw up her fist and punched vigorously at the air in a loud, passionate, and thoroughly unprincesslike celebration of sheer, unbridled joy. She burst into dance, twirling jubilantly

around her room over and over, stopping only when her fatigue outpaced her excitement.

“Oh, I know!” she said after she’d calmed down a little. “I should write to Prince Abel!”

She clapped her hands together enthusiastically and smiled. Realistically, it was unlikely that he’d be able to write back in time considering how little was left of the summer. Furthermore, once school started, she could just talk to him in person. That did not change the fact that she wanted to tell someone about how happy she was feeling. She needed to gush, and she needed to do it *right now*. As for whom she wished to gush to most... Well... It wasn’t a difficult question.

“I do wonder how you’ve been, Prince Abel. I mean, I know we’ll see each other once school begins, but that seems terribly far away right now.”

The gears of fate continued to turn, but one of them shifted in its place, slowly changing the motion of all its peers.

While Mia was raising a ruckus in her room, four men were trading whispers in an underground tavern.

“It’s looking like the empire will actually manage to ride it out.”

“I tried egging on a bunch of nobles, but things aren’t going well.”

“That little upstart in the Golden Moon Ministry... Ludwig, was it? He’s good. And he’s been a brilliant little wrench in our plans...”

“I figured a famine would be enough to do them in, but they’re becoming much too prepared...”

“I heard that Princess Mia and Prince Sion are on friendly terms. We should take this to mean that efforts to turn them against each other have failed.”

“Hmph, the ‘Great Sage of the Empire,’ huh... The meddling kid...”

“Don’t beat yourself up. It was never going to be easy. Prince Sion is bad enough, what with him being a genius and everything, but Belluga’s Rafina is no joke either.”

“In any case, our ultimate goal remains the same, but I’m putting the plans for the empire on hold. We’re changing targets...”

...Mia never did hear back from Abel.

Chapter 19: The Great Sage of the Empire (Romance Mode) Makes a Choice

“Well, it’s been a while.” Mia looked cheerfully across the school grounds. “Who’d have thought there’d come a day when I’d look forward to being back here.”

She’d arrived at Saint-Noel Academy a week before the new school term began. Frankly, she’d never liked being at school all that much, but being freed from her grisly fate left her with a sense of liberation that kept her on a mild but persistent high, and in her eagerness, she decided to leave the Empire early. Humming happily to herself, she stepped through the campus gates.

“Ah, Princess Mia!”

“My, if it isn’t Chloe! Greetings.”

She made her friend an exceptionally formal curtsy, causing her to hastily return the favor. They looked at each other and giggled.

“It’s been too long, really. How have you been?” Mia asked.

“I’m good. I’m glad to see you looking so healthy.”

“Is your father doing well?”

“Oh, yes. Thank you for that, by the way. He was ecstatic about what a great business deal yours was.”

“I’m glad to hear that.”

“Still, I was so shocked. I mean, I knew it, but... it really drove home for me how you truly are the Great Sage of the Empire.”

“My, I’m terribly flattered, but honestly, you’re giving me far too much credit.”

She sure was! For the love of... It’s been too long since Mia said something true about herself.

The two bantered merrily as they walked through the campus. As they approached the courtyard they ran into another familiar face.

“Good day, Princess Mia. It’s wonderful to see you again.”

“Miss Rafina... It’s a pleasure indeed. You’re as charming as always.”

In typical noble fashion, they traded elegant curtsies, after which Rafina tipped her head toward Chloe and smiled politely.

"A good day to you as well, Chloe."

"Ah, um, yes, g-good day to you, Miss Rafina."

Rafina smiled reassuringly at Chloe's nervously stilted response before turning back to Mia.

"I didn't know you and Chloe were friends."

"We are indeed. Best friends, in fact," Mia replied, throwing out the statement with a nonchalance that made Chloe's eyes go wide.

"B-Best... friends?"

"We often get together to talk about the books we've read."

"Gosh, that sounds delightful." An earnest smile spread across Rafina's face. "I was thinking of having some tea. Would you like to join me?"

"Oh, then I'll just head off—"

"Oh? Chloe, is there something urgent you need to attend to?"

"Huh? No. But... I don't want to get in the way of your—"

"Don't be silly. I'd like *both* of you to join me. It will be tea for three."

She smiled again at Chloe before glancing at Mia, who nodded.

"I'd prefer for you to join us as well, Chloe. Miss Rafina was kind enough to invite us, so why not take her up on her offer?" She took Chloe's hand in hers. "Let's go together."

"I heard the news, Mia. You're going to build a school?" asked Rafina after they'd made themselves comfortable in her room. She brought her teacup to her lips and peered over the rim at Mia. "And you're going to open its doors to the masses, as well? A bold move, if you'll pardon my indelicacy."

Chloe blinked in surprise before turning to Mia as well.

"Really? I had no idea you had plans like that."

Their intent gazes made her a little nervous, and she shifted in her seat.

U-Uh oh, did she catch on to the fact that I'm letting in commoners because I don't want to send Tiona's brother to a proper school for nobility?

Though the shadow of the guillotine no longer loomed, being stared at by Rafina could never be good. She hastily stitched together an excuse.

"I-I don't see what all the fuss is about. Talent is talent, right?

No reason to get too hung up on which family it comes from."

Case in point: Tiona's brother was the one who would come up with the new strain of wheat, and his family was hardly prominent. Heck, they barely counted as nobility. Talent didn't pass through blood. Mia was sure of it! Or so she hoped!

Fortunately, her desperately fabricated justification seemed to satisfy Rafina, who looked down at her lap and said in a quiet voice, "I could not agree more."

Seeing that she'd successfully escaped further interrogation, Mia let out her breath in relief. Almost immediately, however, she noticed something was wrong. Rafina was still as a statue, her expression hidden by the oblique angle of her face. There was an extended silence. Suddenly, she leaned over and took Mia's hands in hers.

"I'm so glad, Mia... but I'd expect nothing less from my dear friend," she said, voice filled with emotion and eyes moist with tears.

Mia's words hadn't just satisfied her. They'd resonated with her on a very deep level. Which was a shame, because Mia was oblivious to this fact, and Rafina's reaction was both bewildering and a little scary. All she knew was that she said a bunch of stuff that barely made sense to *her* and now Rafina was squeezing her hands like they were soul mates. Normally, being stared at by Rafina was the kind of thing that would send her into crisis aversion mode, but right now...

"Please, you exaggerate."

She simply smiled back. Because she was on a *roll*, and she knew it. Fate was on her side. That big wave was still at her back, still surging.

It's coming... Oh, I can feel it... It's going strong!

So long as the wave kept going, she was going to keep riding it. It would carry her farther and farther until — perhaps as retribution for the way she'd relied on the fickle whims of fate — it simply vanished, leaving her stranded out at sea.

"Your Highness, pardon my intrusion."

Anne rushed in. Mia failed to notice that her face was ashen.

"What's the matter, Anne?" she asked, completely unprepared for what came next.

Anne looked at her, took a deep breath, and spoke in a slow, deliberate tone.

“There has been... a revolution.”

“...Eh?”

And so, the freefall began.

“A... A what? R-R-Revolution? Why? How? But what about—All that effort... I worked so hard... It meant nothing? A revolution in the empire...”

Mia felt her strength drain from her body, and the whole world began fading to white.

“Eeeek! Mia! Calm down! It’s not the Tearmoon Empire!”

“Huh? Wh-What do you mean?”

She paused mid-fall and stared at Anne.

“It’s Remno. I just heard from Keithwood that a revolution started in the Kingdom of Remno.”

“Huh? I don’t... What?” sputtered Mia. Her mind, still jumbled by the initial shock, failed to comprehend what she was hearing. “Wh-Wh-What in the moons is going on?”

How was there a revolution so suddenly? And in Remno of all places? None of it made any sense.

Just then, there was a knock at the door.

“Excuse us, Miss Rafina.”

Prince Sion and his attendant, Keithwood, walked into the room. They were followed by Tiona.

“I heard that I’d find Princess Mia here...”

“Ah, Prince Sion. Your timing is rather impeccable,” said Rafina, her voice solemn and her expression serious. “Come. Be seated. I’ll bring you some tea.”

Once the newly arrived trio sat down, Keithwood began explaining.

“Okay, let me clarify. At this point in time, we believe the situation is best described as a popular uprising in which those involved are calling for revolution, so it’s probably not quite the real deal yet...” he said with a wry, reluctant grimace. “I apologize for the confusion.”

His hesitant tone underscored the awkwardness of their position in divulging this information. The Kingdom of Sunkland had since its earliest days placed a great deal of emphasis on the value of information. They had a dedicated intelligence agency known as the Wind Crows, which operated in all the nearby nations through a

network of latent spies. Recently, they'd received a missive from their agents in the Kingdom of Remno regarding some concerning developments.

The message had read, "Signs of revolt apparent in Remno. May lead to revolution and attempted deposition of monarch. Government likely to respond with crackdown. High risk of violence to Remno civilians. Military intervention from Sunkland necessary to protect Remno people from government atrocity."

Normally, Keithwood would never be privy to such information. Though he was attendant to the crown prince, this kind of classified intelligence was above his clearance level. However, no kingdom was a monolith. Every large organization had its fair share of internal factions, and Sunkland was no different. There were plenty of officers and officials who were fond of Sion and eager to advance his interests. Keithwood, being the diligent servant he was, had made sure to keep close tabs on the shifting sands of factional allegiance to figure out who was on their side. After all, the prince had a habit of sticking his nose into all sorts of trouble, and Keithwood's network of reliable allies was the only thing standing between the attendant and regular panic attacks.

The tip they'd received this time had come from one of those trustworthy sources. Upon hearing the news, he'd immediately brought it to Sion's attention, who decided after some discussion that it would be best for them to inform Princess Mia as well.

"The fact of the matter is that we have very little information to go on."

The message was exceedingly vague, describing signs of a revolt that *might* lead to revolution. Its closing line, however, was clear as crystal, stating unambiguously that military intervention was necessary. Even Keithwood had felt his heart skip a beat after reading that and, in an uncharacteristic display of indiscretion, had recounted the message to Anne word for word with the "lead to revolution" part intact.

He sighed and shook his head in disappointment at his own lack of composure before saying, "Although, over the past few years, we've seen a number of signs that suggest Remno's political situation is destabilizing."

With its large military and heavy taxes, Remno's governance had always been a delicate balancing act. What caused its equilibrium to collapse was the king's announcement of another tax

hike. It was, of course, met with no shortage of opposition. The first to protest was the Remno chancellor and count, Dasayev Donovan, who lent his ear to the masses and voiced his anger on their behalf.

"I know of this count as well," said Rafina before frowning. "Though I'd heard he is a man of wisdom and mild temperament..."

"Same here. Everything I've heard about the chancellor tells me the same," added Sion, who shared her frown. "We're pretty sure that he moved to put himself between the throne and the people to mediate their disputes, but then, something happened..." He crossed his arms as he trailed off. "Something... *must* have happened..."

A stifling silence descended upon the group.

What? What? Someone tell me what's going on!

Mia, who couldn't follow the conversation at all, was in a state of total confusion. It took every ounce of her will to stop herself from jumping up and down in frustration. She did not, of course, have any memory of a revolution happening in Remno, and it wasn't because she was too busy with matters in her own backyard. Last time around, no significant events had occurred in Tearmoon at this point in time — nothing important enough to require her full and undivided attention, anyway. Therefore, if any kingdom had suffered a revolution or revolt, there was no way it'd go unnoticed by her. If she had no recollection of such an event, then it shouldn't have happened. And yet, it had. It was happening right now. And not in Tearmoon but *Remno*. None of it made any sense.

W-Well, I mean, at least it's not happening in the empire. That's something to be happy about, she thought in an attempt at her trademark brand of positive thinking.

In theory, even if Remno went under in a revolution, it wouldn't be Mia's head on the chopping block... Which meant that technically, there was no need for her to do anything at all... In fact, she should stay as far away from this mess as possible. After all, the wise didn't go leaping into trouble... But...

"Milady... Do you want to go?"

"...Eh?"

A sudden voice caused Mia to snap out of it, and she turned to find Anne staring at her. There was no levity in the maid's expression.

"Wh-What are you talking about, Anne? I certainly never said anything about—"

"But... you... you look like you're about to cry."

“Huh? That’s not true. I’m not...”

That’s right. All this time, I’ve been working to keep myself away from the guillotine...

Memories began to resurface in her mind. Flashback after flashback of the past year of her life. She remembered the terror of the guillotine, and all the sweat and tears she’d shed trying to avert that horrible fate.

Yes. I worked so hard to get where I am now. Why would I possibly go to a place like that and throw myself into danger again? Staying away is the correct choice. I’m sure of it...

The right path was obvious.

“...But—”

The flashbacks wouldn’t stop. The memories kept coming. A gentle smile flickered in her mind like a candle. She remembered seeing it as he helped her onto a horse... as he stuffed a sandwich into his mouth... as he danced with her, a nervous drop of sweat sliding down his brow... Scene after scene, she saw nothing but his face. Then the montage faded, and she looked around. Anne’s and Chloe’s... Sion’s and Keithwood’s... Rafina’s and Tiona’s... All of their gazes were focused on her.

“...I don’t suppose anyone will take no for an answer, will they?” she said in a small, hushed voice. Her lips, however, were curled up into an eager smile. “I do want to go. I want to go... to Prince Abel.”

Thus did Mia, at long last freed from the fetters of the bloody diary and the doom it foretold, make her first real choice. She looked across the room, meeting the gaze of every person at the table before asking, “Will you help me?”

N-Not that I want to see him or anything! This is just... strategy! Yes, it’s strategy! So people don’t get disillusioned with me and throw me to the guillotine again! screamed her inner tsundere.

Chapter 20: All the Pieces are in Place on the Board...

"I want to go. Will you help me?"

The soft voice carried a request from the heart of a young girl known as the Great Sage of the Empire. It was a request that, in any other circumstance, should have been turned down and admonished for its ludicrous nature. However...

"That's easier said than done, Princess Mia. Tensions are flaring in Remno and the whole kingdom is currently on high alert. Cross the border with a troop of guards and they might assume it's an invasion. Getting into the kingdom will, at the very least, involve faking your identity and staying out of sight..." said Keithwood.

Sion nodded before adding, "True. In a time like this, they're not going to let anyone suspicious across the border. We'll need to formulate a plan."

"I see..." said Mia. "How can we do this?"

None of the people present refused her. They listened to her plea and began to think — not of problems but solutions. There was no doubt, no skepticism. No one asked what they could accomplish by going. No one questioned the viability of the idea. They skipped the whats and whys, jumping directly to hows, as though helping Mia was a foregone conclusion. Then, in the face of what was ostensibly an impossible task, they happened upon a ray of hope. It didn't even take them long. After all, Mia might be incompetent, but she'd surrounded herself with people who were anything but. When the Mia Brigade was on the job, problems didn't stand a chance.

To everyone's surprise, however, the first to speak was their most unassuming member.

"Um..."

Everyone turned toward the source of the voice, Chloe, who flinched before putting down her quivering hand, clearly intimidated by the sheer density of regalness in the room.

“Our company’s caravan is, um...” she took a breath and continued on in a stammering voice, “scheduled to go to the Kingdom of Remno, so, um... what if you go with the carts?”

“Carts, you say... Ah, I see. Camouflage,” said Keithwood after a moment of cross-armed contemplation. “Good idea. Disguised as a merchant, there’s a good chance you’ll be able to cross the border without anyone knowing. Plus, you’ll avoid pissing off anyone you run into. After all, people in Remno probably aren’t very fond of royalty right now.”

It was certainly a better option than showing up as a foreign aristocrat — or, even worse, a mysterious traveler of unidentified origin — and it would afford her easier movement. Seeing that a viable plan was taking shape, the frown across Keithwood’s brow began to fade. Then Sion spoke.

“Looks like we have a plan. In that case, I’ll go too.”

“Wait, what?!”

Keithwood wheeled around and stared at his master incredulously. It was true that he had a positive impression of Mia, and he didn’t exactly hate the idea of doing something to help her. With Sion’s permission, he was even willing to accompany her on her journey. It was why he’d told her about the situation in the first place. Heck, he was secretly looking forward to lending her his strength. Considering his habitual impassivity, she might as well have been his favorite celebrity. But if Sion intended to wade into danger himself, then he had no choice but to object.

“Your Highness, that will not do. Please consider your position. You are the Crown Prince of Sunkland.” And the Crown Prince of Sunkland had absolutely no business wandering around a foreign kingdom in the throes of a violent uprising. Knowing Sion, though, Keithwood figured he’d back down if cautioned. After all, Sion almost always placed the future of his kingdom above his own wishes and deeply valued sound arguments and principled beliefs. For some reason, though, Sion flashed him a wily grin.

“I am indeed, Keithwood, and that’s exactly why I’m going with her.”

“What... do you mean?”

“You see, I don’t believe that a great king *must* be a man of valor. It takes more than a good sword arm to rule. At the same time, I don’t believe a craven man would be fit to rule a kingdom of Sunkland’s caliber. Don’t you agree?”

"Well, yes, what you say is true, but..."

Uh oh.

Those were the kind of sound arguments and principled beliefs Keithwood was so accustomed to hearing from Sion, except this time, he was standing on the opposite side of the debate stage. This was exactly the kind of situation where the prince shined, and he had a sinking feeling that Sion was about to flex on him.

"Suppose, for the sake of argument, that there exists a princess of a large kingdom who is my equal in both rank and power. She, out of concern for the safety of a fellow classmate, chooses valiantly to trek into the dangerous lands of a foreign nation. And this despite the fact that she possesses not even the ability to defend herself in a fight," Sion said with a dramatic flair. "Faced with the resolve of this entirely theoretical princess, do you not think it would reflect on my image poorly, should I hesitate to join her in her quest?"

"I..."

It... wasn't exactly nonsense. And that was the worst part. His unnecessary panache aside, Sion actually had a point. Being the prince of a large kingdom, he had no shortage of political enemies who would jump at the chance to get dirt on him. It was therefore reasonable for him to, as much as he could, behave in a way that avoided damaging his reputation.

Is this... checkmate? Damn it. I guess we're doing this. I'd better contact our agents in Remno and give them a heads-up.

Fortunately, they had allies inside Remno — the result of long years of tireless groundwork by Sunkland's dedicated intelligence agency, which had established a skilled spy network in a number of foreign nations. It was an accomplishment that spoke to the foresight of the King of Sunkland, who recognized the importance of information warfare early and often. Without their intelligence division, they would never have received such swift news of the uprising in Remno. Back home, meetings were probably already underway to discuss whether or not military intervention should be undertaken.

Which is great and all... but for the love of the sun, that does not *make it okay for the freaking crown prince to be walking into what is potentially enemy territory at a time like this, damn it! Augh!*

Keithwood rubbed his temples as he felt a familiar sensation creeping up on him. It was an old friend, and it was called a

headache.

"Your Highness... I'll go with you too."

Following in Sion's footsteps, Tiona volunteered her assistance as well. She dabbled in swordplay, and while she was no master, she was skilled enough to ensure that any bandits who tangled with her were going to have a rough time. If nothing else, she was stronger than Mia. Since they were unable to bring any imperial guards with them, having more than one person who could handle themselves in a fight was not a bad proposition.

Mia said nothing. She simply lowered her head in a deep bow, as if the selfless altruism of her friend deserved more than the meaningless platitude of spoken thanks, and only wordless, earnest acceptance befit the kindness being offered.

"Your Highness..."

Then, there was a third voice.

"I'll go too. Please, take me with you."

Mia looked at the final speaker and, to her dismay, found that she couldn't say yes.

"Your Highness? May I?" continued Anne, her tone timid.

There was a short silence. Then Mia looked away.

"I'm sorry, Anne, but I can't let you come with me."

It wasn't because she didn't want Anne to accompany her. Quite the opposite, actually, considering Anne's presence would relieve her from the burden of many everyday tasks. She just couldn't bring Anne with her and the reason was simple: Anne couldn't ride a horse!

Consider, for example, a situation in which they were in real danger and needed to escape quickly. Since Anne couldn't handle a horse by herself, she'd need to ride together with someone else — probably Keithwood. Considering the increased burden of carrying two riders, the best horse — either the easiest to ride or the strongest — would have to be given to the pair. It was the soundest and most obvious arrangement. Were it any other maid, Mia would veto the idea in a heartbeat, but not for Anne. She felt indebted to her maid, and she wished to repay her loyalty with sincerity and kindness. If their lives were on the line, she couldn't choose to put Anne at risk, nor would she want to.

Now consider another scenario in which Anne hadn't come with them, meaning everyone present knew how to ride. In that case, the rule of ladies first would apply, and there was a very good chance

that Mia would be given the best horse of the bunch, significantly improving the odds of her making a successful escape. Basically, this was just the good old Mia First policy at work again, and she was doing everything in her power to maximize the probability of her own survival.

"You can't ride a horse, Anne, which means there's a good chance you'll slow everyone down. And the place to which we're headed is probably very dangerous."

"But, Your Highness... I..."

Tears welled up in Anne's eyes. She began sniffling, grief evident in her voice.

"Oh, Anne, don't cry... It's okay. I'll make it back. You can take my word for it," said Mia, comforting her distressed maid with a tender smile. "So, can I trust you to hold down the fort for me while I'm gone? I'll do my job, and you do yours. Okay?"

She held Anne's gaze, letting her eyes do the rest of the talking. After all, when she returned, she'd doubtlessly want to relax with a hot cup of tea. Maybe she'd be so tired she'd want to dive straight into bed. Or perhaps she'd yearn for a good, long soak. There were all sorts of things she might want to do when she came back, and preparing for them was as important a duty as any other. Though she'd left it all unsaid, she trusted that this nuance had been conveyed.

It was, of course, more consolation than honest need, spoken primarily to ease Anne's misery. Alas, she might have let too much of her true motivations slip. Despite her words of comfort, Anne's expression never brightened.

Anne watched as Mia and her newly recruited co-conspirators left one after another to make preparations for their planned infiltration of Remno. Soon, she was the only one left in the room. There she stood, staring blankly at the door as it closed for the last time. A heavy silence followed.

I'm... dead weight. Because I don't know how to ride a horse... I've become a burden for Mia.

She looked down at the ground. Soon, a steady patter began to echo in the room. Tears of frustration streamed down her cheeks, accumulating in a small puddle on the floor. Mia had pushed her away, making it clear that her inability to ride would make her a burden on everyone else. It was blunt, and harsh, and — worst of

all — utterly kind. She wasn't stupid; she knew Mia was doing it on purpose to ease the weight on her conscience. Her dear mistress didn't think twice about trading their friendship for her safety, and she couldn't do a thing about it. Because it was all true. She *would* be a burden, and she wasn't sure if she could ever forgive herself for that.

Suddenly, she heard a solemn, commanding voice, causing her to recoil.

"Miss Anne. Compose yourself."

She turned to find Rafina observing her with a passive expression.

"Um... Miss Rafina?"

"It would seem to me that you hardly have the time to be moping about here."

"B-But... I feel so worthless. If I knew how to ride a horse, I could go with Her Highness—"

"What are you to Princess Mia?"

"Huh? I... I'm her personal maid-in-waiting..."

Rafina shook her head.

"I don't believe that's correct. Have you forgotten how Mia introduced you to me?" She looked straight into Anne's eyes. "You're her right hand and confidante."

Rafina's words hit Anne like lightning, and she reeled from the impact.

"Mia told you to do your job. What is that job, then? Is it to stand here, looking down at the floor feeling sorry for yourself?"

"My... job?"

"Yes, your job. A job doable only by Mia's right hand and confidante. Does anything come to mind?"

For some time, Anne said nothing. Then, she bowed and left the room. Rafina watched as Anne walked out the door, her posture considerably straighter than it had been moments before.

Thus the maid returned to being behind the scenes. Anne acted immediately, leaving the academy a mere day after Mia and her crew. Having realized what it was that she must do she held it close to her heart, allowing it to fill her with resolve as she set out for her destination: the Tearmoon Empire. Her unwavering loyalty would ultimately drop the empire's strongest piece onto the board, but that is a story for a later time.

And so, all the pieces of the game were in place on the board — a board that took the shape of the Kingdom of Remno, and a game of conspiracy that would see the *dame blanche*, Mia and her motley crew, attempt a daring rescue of her lone *cavalier*, Prince Abel, from the clutches of a sea of *noir*.

The game was in motion, its outcome undecided. Where the future would lead was anyone's guess.

Chapter 21: A Wistful Prayer and a Maiden's Sigh

A string of carts rolled through a town on the outskirts of the Holy Principality of Belluga. They bore various goods that Forkroad & Co. intended to sell, along with four larger items that were definitely not intended for sale — Mia and her three co-conspirators were hidden in the back of one of the carts.

Three days had passed since they'd joined the caravan, and a stifling silence had descended upon the group. Mia stared wordlessly at the floor of the cart, her face a little pale. She was sitting with her knees held tight against her chest. The riding blouse and shorts she wore had been chosen for ease of movement, but that function was limited at the moment.

At times, she would let out a thin sigh, causing Tiona to glance worriedly in her direction.

Princess Mia... She must be so worried, Tiona thought as she considered Mia's perspective. Abel, her princely sweetheart, was currently stranded in dangerous territory. Thoughts of him probably filled her heart with grief. *I need to do everything I can to protect her and bring her to Prince Abel's side.*

Her fingers tightened around the hilt of the thin sword at her waist.

Please, Prince Abel. Be safe.

She closed her eyes and mouthed a silent prayer.

Keithwood, meanwhile, had a different take on the scene.

Well then, it looks like even Princess Mia isn't immune to nervousness.

They were headed for the Kingdom of Remno, which was certainly dangerous territory. Though public order was still broadly intact, the areas with active revolts posed an undeniable risk to their safety. People were furious at Remno royalty, and the vector of their rage could easily be redirected toward the rulers of foreign

nations. If their identities were ever revealed, this mission might very well prove fatal. And Mia knew it, she had to. The risk was so obvious that it seemed inconceivable for someone known as the Great Sage of the Empire to have overlooked it. There was no doubt in his mind that she was cognizant of the danger and had overcome her fear to be here.

I have to give her credit. She's not just smart, but she knows to be judicious with her courage; she's brave when it counts.

He pursed his lips thoughtfully as he studied her, growing increasingly aware that some part of him wouldn't mind seeing a union between Mia and his master.

Finally, let's shift the perspective to the person in question and figure out what Mia was actually thinking through all this...

U-Ugh... I... I feel sick...

She was... just plain cartsick. And very badly cartsick at that. After all, she'd only ever ridden in carriages meant for use by the imperial family, which were works of exceptional craftsmanship that maximized the comfort of their passengers. Having gotten used to the ease of travel such luxurious vehicles afforded, the wagons of merchants proved awfully unpleasant. The stiff wood of the floor grated painfully on her delicate rear, and the unforgiving bumpiness of the road made short work of her vestibular system.

Every so often, she'd force out a few breaths in an attempt to quell the nausea, but she was slowly losing the war against her stomach as it sent wave after wave of acrid juices up her throat. To her credit, she was aware that it seemed rather rude to give her three friends the silent treatment after asking them to come on a journey like this with her. However, every time she attempted to make conversation, she'd be assaulted by a bout of queasiness that made her head spin.

I might just vomit if I open my mouth...

She couldn't say it out loud, either. Nauseated or not, she was still a princess, and she had an image to maintain. No princess with even a shred of pride would just flat out tell people she was going to throw up. So she kept her head down and endured, desperately fighting the urge to empty the contents of her stomach onto the wagon floor.

At no point did issues such as their true identities being exposed to the rebelling masses cross her mind. It had never even occurred

to her that such a thing would be a problem. She was worried about Abel, of course, but her coping mechanism for that particular concern was... to avoid thinking about it.

It's okay. When I was captured, it took a while before they killed me. We'll make it in time.

Despite her rationalizing, however, she couldn't help but hope he was safe. For a brief moment, she looked up, aiming this wistful prayer of a star-crossed lover at the sky... Only for her to swallow it back down as another wave of nausea threatened to send more than just a prayer out of her mouth.

Can't think... I feel so sick...

She held her hands over her face, feeling like her limit was fast approaching.

"We're almost past the border. Keep it up, everyone. Just a little longer," said Sion, who'd gone to the driver's box to take a look around. He rejoined them in the wagon.

The first barrier to reaching Prince Abel was the border. According to information they'd obtained beforehand, the Kingdom of Remno was currently in a state of high security. Entering and exiting the kingdom was heavily restricted, with only a handful of merchant companies receiving exemptions.

"Not that it's surprising. You'd expect them to tighten border control at a time like this. Internal strife is exactly the kind of thing neighboring nations will try to take advantage of by sending in their own agents. They might offer assistance to either faction in exchange for future favors, or they might use the chaos as part of an attempted coup. Remno's military strength also makes them an especially attractive target, as no half-decent ruler would pass up an opportunity to weaken a powerful foreign army."

Sion's matter-of-fact explanation was met with nods from Keithwood and Tiona. Mia watched them, her gaze growing slightly distant.

Huh... I wonder if they were like this when the empire went through its revolution too?

"Still," Sion continued, "I have to admit that this is going more smoothly than I expected."

"Thanks to Miss Chloe's brilliant plan. And, of course, this route that our team of undercover agents plotted out for..."

Keithwood trailed off and tilted his head a little with a frown. Soon after, there was a scream from the driver's box.

“B-Bandits! They’re coming for us!”

“Bandits?”

Sion and Keithwood traded narrow-eyed glances.

“That’s strange. A caravan of this size shouldn’t...”

The Forkroad caravan was fairly large, consisting of ten wagons. A group of this size would be accompanied by private mercenaries, which should have made it far too risky a target for bandits to gamble with.

“Public order might be in short supply right now, but still, there’s something fishy about this.”

The two of them simultaneously leapt to their feet.

“Princess Mia, come this way!”

A sudden tug on her arm sent her stumbling toward the front of the wagon.

“Bleugh—” Her hands shot to her mouth and she swallowed hard, just barely managing to avoid gastrological disaster. “Ugh! Wh-What was that for?!”

She was about to shout further outrage at the impertinent tugger of her arm, only for the words to catch in her throat when she looked up to find Sion, his lips tight and his eyes hard. He was staring past her. She followed his gaze and turned around.

“Who—?!”

She gasped as the wagon cover was flipped open and a lean-bodied man stepped inside. He was wrapped in black fabric from head to toe. Even his face was covered with a black cloth. He looked at the four of them and drew his sword. It looked a little shorter than the standard-issue ones most knights carried.

“A-A-A... A bandit?”

The blade’s threatening gleam sent a shiver up her spine that made her voice tremble.

“My oh my, not one for manners, are you? Look, you’re scaring the ladies,” said Keithwood with a tilt of his chin.

The next instant, Keithwood was halfway across the wagon, sword in hand. His sudden lunge was accompanied by a sharp thrust. With skill and power that rivaled Sion, he aimed his sword directly at the man’s dominant arm. There was a clang as metal met metal, and Keithwood’s sword strayed from its path. He grimaced and hopped backward as his enemy’s blade cleaved the air an inch away from his face, only to kick the floor as he landed, propelling himself forward for a second thrust. His offbeat assault continued,

striking at his opponent with a syncopated rhythm that threw off the regular timing of bladed exchanges. The black-garbed man, however, was no slouch and deftly parried his attacks left and right. Their blades danced around each other in sharp arcs that cut straight through the canvas of the wagon, and the shredded fabric began fluttering wildly in the wind.

"Going toe to toe with me, huh... Careful, milord. This man's no mere bandit."

"Agreed. His movement is practiced," said Sion with a stern-faced nod. "Who are you? An assassin of some sort?"

"Well, I mean, if he *was*, he probably wouldn't just tell you his name, so— Whoa!"

The man's shortsword lashed out again as they traded quips. Keithwood caught the incoming blade and traded blows while backing up. His steps were smooth and deliberate, flowing from one to the next in a graceful sequence that seemed more dance than battle.

"Tsk tsk, interrupting people while they're talking... You assassins sure are a rude lot, aren't you?" he scoffed.

His provocation had little effect on the man, who continued to slowly edge toward them.

"Trying to close the distance, are we? Well, two can play at that game."

This time, Keithwood went on the offensive. Employing a style that eschewed wide swings in favor of thrusting strikes, he was unimpeded by the confined space of the wagon. Each attack, even if blocked, would flow smoothly to the next, creating a perfect chain that — though unable to deal a fatal blow — was more than enough to keep the man busy. As he continued his barrage, he began to frown.

"Something's not right... This guy's no amateur. He's not getting anywhere and he knows it, so why isn't he leaving? What's he playing at— Wait, f—"

He snarled and spun toward the others.

"Milord! Watch out! He has backup!"

The swoosh of multiple swords began before his sentence had concluded. The damaged canvas was cut into tatters as two additional black-garbed men jumped onto the front of the wagon.

W-We're trapped!

Mia's eyes darted left and right for a way of escape, to no avail.

They had Sion, but surely, even he couldn't handle two people at once. Suddenly, there was a very real danger to their lives, and she was gripped by a sensation she'd long forgotten — the primal fear of death. On the verge of tears, she whimpered and looked at the prince, whose expression could only be described as the polar opposite of hers.

"Wow, you people sure went to a lot of trouble just to trap a few kids on a wagon."

Calmly, he turned toward the newcomers, the motion slow but regal, and drew his weapon. He fixed the two flanking assailants with a glare, brandishing not the sword in his hand but the blades in his eyes. A palpable tension rippled from him, causing Mia's hair to stand on end. Her eyes widened in recognition, for she knew this sensation well. It was the deadly aura Sion gave off when he was looking at someone he had decided to kill.

In the previous timeline, I was the one on the receiving end of that terrible gaze.

She looked at his intrepid figure and felt reassured. After all, the frightening power that had once threatened her life was now being used to protect her from harm. The thought was enough to calm her nerves and even instill a bit of confidence.

Phew, it looks like we'll be fine! Thank the moons for Prince Sion! I bet he kills bandits like these all the time! This'll be a breeze for him!

As she grew increasingly optimistic, the gravity of the situation began to fade, and she even considered cheering him on the way one does a friend's sports match.

"All right. Which of you would like the honor of being the first ever victim of my blade?"

Let's go Si-on, let's— Wait what?! The first*?!*

All the confidence she'd built up melted away in an instant.

O-Okay, maybe we should watch this from a safer distance... Just in case...

She began crawling toward the edge of the wagon on her hands and knees. Just then, one of the wheels hit an uneven patch of ground, and the whole wagon bounced up into the air.

"...Eh?"

A strange sequence of sensations followed. First, there was a brief period of weightlessness. Then, she felt the slap of fabric against her back. Finally, there was a blunt impact to her side followed by the dizzying feeling of rolling.

The wagon was right in the middle of crossing a large river that ran along the border. She opened her eyes to find herself diving toward a carpet of water so vast it looked like an ocean. Powerful currents surged through it, throwing up large sprays as they crashed loudly past any obstacles in their path.

“Hyaaaaaaaaaaah!”

She let out a rather undignified scream as she plunged into the watery depths.

“Damn it! Princess Mia! I’m coming!”

The last thing she heard before the final splash was the panicked voice of Sion...

And so, Tearmoon’s princess and Sunkland’s prince disappeared into the river.

Chapter 22: Princess Mia and the Correct Way to Do Artificial Respiration

There was another brief moment of weightlessness. Then, the sting of cold water. Having gone in head first, the river's depth proved life-saving... only for it to turn life-threatening a second later.

"Blub blub blub...."

Mia, you see, couldn't swim to save her life. Which was a problem, because she definitely needed to swim to save her life right now. Having almost never been in water too deep to stand in, she had no idea how to handle herself. Swimming was not part of the Tearmoon culture, and although Mia's love of bathing meant she was no stranger to large pools of water, it did not confer upon her the ability to stay afloat. Now, the pedantic might point out that it's technically not possible to conclude with absolute certainty that someone can't swim when they've never tried before. Who knows? They might possess some innate gift. This possibility, however, was quickly ruled out by what she did next.

"Ablub... Ablublublub..."

She did nothing except flail around helplessly, a string of air bubbles rising from her mouth. Round and round she spun as the powerful current took hold of her and dragged her ever deeper. She couldn't breathe. Her chest hurt. Lights began to flash in her vision.

Urrrghh... This is bad... Also... I feel terribly sick... Bleurgh...

She lost track of up and down as she went, sinking and tumbling at the same time. The world spun. Her head spun. Her eyes spun too. Already fatigued from the ordeal on the wagon, her vestibular system finally threw in the towel, and she belched out her final breath of air.

Ahh... I see. So this is it. I'm going to die here. I suppose... it beats dying on the guillotine... Urgh...

A little of the weight lifted from her chest as she thought that, and she felt a little better. All that remained was a sad, bittersweet

ache that followed her fading consciousness down into the all-consuming darkness.

"—ess Mia! Hey! Come on, wake up! Princess Mia!"

She heard a voice calling her name. It sounded distant. Then she felt her body being shaken, followed by a few slaps on her cheek. There was a faint sourness in her mouth. It was unpleasant. But it all felt so far away, as though her senses were being dulled by a thick blanket.

Urrrghh... What is... I'm... Where?

She willed her eyes open. It wasn't easy, but she managed. There, mere inches away from her face, she saw Prince Sion's dashing visage.

Prince Sion? I wonder what he's doing...

Reaching through the fog in her mind, she produced a memory from long ago of something Anne had told her.

Ah, that reminds me... Anne said she learned about it from Elise's novel. Something about saving people who'd drowned... by breathing air into them through a kiss...

Progress was slow, but she slowly began to piece thoughts together.

I remember telling her that's so indecent... but even then, I actually thought it was quite romantic... and...

Then it occurred to her.

D-Does that mean Prince Sion is going to kiss me? B-But... this is my first kiss! And I was going to save it for Prince Abel!

Faced with something she'd never experienced in her life — both this and the last — her mind went into meltdown mode. Never did she imagine she'd be in a situation like this. And with her archnemesis Sion to boot.

Ahhh, Prince Abel, forgive me. My heart is pounding... But, I mean, this is *pretty dreamy. Anyone's heart would be pounding in a situation like this, so it's not really my fault. That's right. This is beyond my control... definitely beyond my control...*

With her conscience cleared, she closed her eyes and waited for the inevitable, but not before spitting out some water that had been sloshing around in her mouth. It was rather bitter, and it also seemed a tad inappropriate to have her mouth full for the impending event.

The next thing she knew, her face had been turned to the side.

Hm? My, how odd. Why sideways?

Before she could manage another thought, something touched her lips.

Eeep!

Her mind squeaked in surprise, flustered to almost an embarrassing degree by the sensation... Which, on second thought, wasn't exactly what she was expecting. It — the source of the sensation — parted her lips, pushed past her teeth, and wriggled its way into her mouth, its texture coarser than she'd imagined.

Wh-What is this?

Then, without warning, it prodded the back of her throat.

"Bleeech!"

She made a decidedly unromantic sound and woke up with a start.

Sunkland-Style Artificial Respiration: Frequently Asked Questions

(3) What if the victim vomits?

If the victim vomits, immediately turn the head to the side. Then, clean the inside of the mouth by scooping out any physical matter with your finger before resuming artificial respiration.

...So, as a result of Sion's slightly clumsy but perfectly appropriate treatment, Mia managed to hold on to her first kiss. Good for her!

Hunched on all fours with tears in her eyes, Mia threw up many mouthfuls of water before her coughing fit subsided and she glanced up, pallid and hollow-eyed.

"Oh thank the sun you're breathing again," Sion said with a look of relief.

"I... I thought I was going to die."

"Yes, that was indeed a dangerous current we got swept up in."

Not the current! I meant you! You and the finger you stuck all the way down my throat! And that embarrassing sound you made me make! Ugh, just terrible...

The knowledge that her mind had been in the gutter the whole time made it that much more embarrassing. Still, he *had* saved her

life. The least she could do was to put aside her chagrin.

"Thank you very much for saving me, Prince Sion."

Her polite words of appreciation, to her surprise, were met with a troubled frown.

"It's a little early to be thanking me..." he said as he surveyed their surroundings.

She did the same.

"Where... are we?" she asked.

"Downstream from where we fell in. Based on the map I saw before, my guess would be we're in the northwestern area of Remno."

"I see. We managed to get into the kingdom then."

"True. We did get in... but we're in a bad location. First, I'm pretty sure the royal capital is a good distance away. Second, the border is over there now." He grimaced and glanced to the side. "Now, if we need to get out of Remno, we'll have to cross both this river and..."

Mia followed the direction of his gaze. Looming in the distance was the jagged contour of a mountain that now blocked their way to the border.

Chapter 23: A Grownup Everyone Should Stay Away From

A fire crackled on the riverside, its warm glow staving off the cold darkness of the night. Mia let out a sigh of relief.

"Okay, we don't have to worry about catching a cold anymore."

The Kingdom of Remno was not in the frigid north, but it wasn't so southern that its nights were perpetually sweltering either. Worried about the effects a chilly night could have on their health, they promptly started a fire. Well, one of them had. The other just watched.

"I must say, I didn't think you'd know how to start a fire," said Mia.

"...Well, I've gone hunting before. I learned a few things on those trips," answered Sion, not meeting her gaze. Instead he looked away, his cheeks glowing red in the firelight.

It was hard to blame him. Everything they wore was soaked through and had to be removed to dry, leaving both of them wearing nothing but their underclothes. As a result, Sion, being the gentleman that he was, had to constantly try to keep his gaze pointed away from her. Mia, meanwhile, rested her chin on her knees and observed him.

My! What an adorable reaction!

The chink of innocence in his armor of competence put a smile on her face. Not that she wasn't embarrassed too, of course. Her sensibilities were equally vulnerable to the awkwardness of being stared at by someone of the opposite sex while wearing nothing but wet underwear. However, at the end of the day, Sion was a boy of twelve or thirteen, whereas Mia was twenty years old on the inside — Twenty-one, actually, considering it had been almost a year since she'd leapt through time.

She was a grownup! A lady of maturity and composure! Who was gawking at a blushing boy with a creepy grin on her face!

She was... the kind of grownup everyone should stay away

from.

"If anything, I'm the one who's surprised," said Sion. "I mean, I know they call you the Great Sage of the Empire, but I never expected you'd even know which wild herbs are edible."

"Oh, please. It's hardly the kind of thing to be surprised about," she said with the smug confidence of someone holding an ace up their sleeve.

There was a reason for her attitude. Mia, you see, was no amateur. She had previous experience in spending the night in a forest. It wasn't during the incident in the Sealence Forest; it was much longer ago, all the way back in the previous timeline. In a desperate attempt to escape from the revolutionary army, she'd run into a forest to hide, accompanied by only a single maid of dubious competence.

Those were some tough times...

She couldn't find drinking water. She had no food. Her guards had long been separated from her, and wild beasts seemed to lurk in every shadow. Furthermore, her captors were nearby, preventing her from seeking help.

It didn't take long for her maid to flee to one of the villages in the vicinity.

"It's all your fault that I got dragged into this mess!"

Leaving behind those words and a spiteful glare as a parting gift, the girl ran off. With her departure, Mia became truly and brutally alone. As the night grew darker, her heart grew frailer. Thirst and hunger, amplified by the dreadful loneliness of the woodland gloom, gnawed painfully at her mind and body. Eventually her will gave way, and she shambled out into a nearby village, where she was promptly captured by the revolutionary army.

Compared to that, this is a walk in the park.

Thirst wasn't going to be an issue. After all, a river — when it wasn't trying to drown you, anyway — was an infinite source of drinking water. As for hunger, it would depend on what was edible in the forests of the given continent. Which, of course, Mia had already thoroughly researched when she'd holed herself up in the library. The all-encompassing and ever-present fear of the guillotine had turned her into a veritable wilderness guru. By now she was knowledgeable enough to give real survival specialists a run for their money.

She examined their surroundings and took note of her available options, ranging from edible herbs to berries and fruits, and decided that her tummy wasn't going to complain for a good while. Furthermore, she had Prince Sion at her side.

I remember being scared to death of running into a bear or wolf back then, but as long as I have him, she thought with an appraising glance at Sion, *I'm safe.*

With relief came contentment, and a complacent smile slowly spread across her lips. A reasonable bystander would have pointed out that asking a boy to single-handedly fight off a bear or wolf was a tall order, if not impossible, but alas, no such bystander was available to provide any level-headed commentary. The only other person present was Sion himself, who was currently staring contemplatively off into the distance and unavailable for comment.

Now that I think about it, I can't believe he's now protecting me. It's all very bizarre, she thought, idly studying his profile. His features were so chiseled that it actually upset her. It upset her so much, in fact, that she was unable to resist the urge to have some fun at his expense.

"Say, Prince Sion, would it be all right if I asked you a question?"

He glanced quickly at her before turning away again. "Sure. I'll answer to the best of my ability. Within limits, of course..."

She kept her eyes on him and continued in a quiet voice. "If you were to discover that your friend and schoolmate, Prince Abel, was taking part in the forceful suppression of his people, would you strike him down?"

"I..."

"I have heard much about your character, and I believe you to be a person of integrity, every bit as noble-minded as Miss Rafina. And it is precisely because of your character that I wish to ask you. If someone you knew by name — someone who is your friend — was involved in the doing of evil deeds, would you pass judgment on them with your sword?"

It was a question that had been on her mind for a long time. The revolutionary army, led by Prince Sion and Tiona, had taken her life. To a certain degree she had come to understand why they'd done so. She could see how the hunger of her people had spurred their anger. Driven by their many grievances, they'd probably had ample reason to wish for her death.

But that was then. They had been people she didn't know. What she was truly curious about... was how Sion had felt. What thoughts and feelings had been going through his head when he watched that terrible blade descend upon her neck?

"That... certainly came out of the blue, Princess Mia."

Sion fell silent for a moment, his face pensive.

I hadn't considered that possibility at all...

The slightest hint of uncertainty flickered through his eyes, lasting only a second. Then, he answered.

"If Prince Abel were to take part in the forceful suppression of his people and stained his sword with their blood... Then yes. I would have no choice but to turn mine against him."

His voice was unwavering, and he spoke with the solemn conviction of someone who, raised and trained to be the Crown Prince of Sunkland since he was a baby, had been told for his whole life to uphold justice at all times. It was simply not in him to turn a blind eye to evil, especially if the doer was standing before him. However, Mia's next words would cause him to falter.

"So depending on the circumstances, you're willing to kill Prince Abel? Is that what you mean, Prince Sion?"

He had no immediate reply. It was true that Abel Remno was no bosom buddy to him. Even so, their shared experiences as classmates at Saint-Noel Academy had been more than enough to forge between them a bond that was close enough to be called friendship. If the time came, could he raise his sword against someone he considered a friend? Could he *kill* Abel? Would his heart allow it? He answered, trying very hard to ignore the uncertainty wavering within him.

"Yes, it is. What you said is possible."

Then, in a tone very different from his usual confidence, he qualified his statement as though making an excuse. "I mean, I'd do it, but it's not as if I'd have any choice, right? It's a choice that Prince Abel would have made. There'd be nothing I could do about it."

To rule a kingdom was to take on the responsibility of upholding justice. As a member of the royal family, Sion had always been taught that he had a duty to deliver appropriate punishment to those who committed evil, and that principle served both as a standard he strove toward and a source of discipline for himself.

“You’d have no choice... There’d be nothing you could do... Is that really true?”

And yet, the girl before him, known as the Great Sage of the Empire, expressed doubt.

“Are you saying I’m wrong?”

His voice took on an edge. A thought flashed across his mind. Was Mia viewing this through the lens of reason... or love? Was she perhaps inserting her personal emotions and taking Abel’s side? He considered the idea, then dismissed it.

No, she’s not.

He saw the glint in her eyes. It wasn’t the faint flicker of sorrow, nor was it the pitiful embers of appeal. No... It was anger. The Great Sage of the Empire was furious at what he’d said.

“Those words should come only from the lips of one who has already done everything in their power to avoid violence, should they not, Prince Sion?”

The way she looked at him — through him — made his breath catch in his throat. He passed judgment because he had no choice. He delivered punishment because evil had been done. These were core tenets of his world view. He saw them as fundamental truths, as plain as the sun in the sky. And yet, Mia had questioned them. In doing so, she seemed to be asking him, “Have you, Prince Sion? You claim to have no choice... but what have you done to prevent that evil? To stop that person from committing the deed?”

Sion wasn’t oblivious to the difficulties faced by the Kingdom of Remno. His spies working there covertly had sent him a steady stream of reports over the summer holiday, and he’d known that unrest was in the air. He’d even braced himself for the eventuality of a military intervention. That was, however, the extent of what he’d done. There was nothing else. Though he went around spouting moral platitudes about upholding justice and punishing those who torment the masses, he hadn’t done a single thing to stop that torment from being inflicted. Did he, then, truly have the right to pass judgment on Prince Abel? A nebulous mass of uncertainty began to grow in his heart, along with a new question.

Why did Princess Mia set out on this journey? I thought it was because she just wanted to see Prince Abel... but could there be another reason? Could she be trying to stop him from doing something wrong?

He continued following the logic of his own hypothesis...

Which means... she’s trying to stop the revolution from breaking out

in Remno? Is that even possible?

He looked at her gazing into the fire. She said nothing. Her silence, however, and the words they left unsaid echoed in his mind, and he discovered within him a budding sense of awe for the young princess.

...It hardly needs to be said at this point, but obviously, Mia had no intention of stopping the revolution. To be honest, she didn't give a damn about Sion's beliefs either. So what was she getting so angry about, then?

You had no choice? That's *your excuse for what you did to me?!*

Therein lay the source of her outrage. Sure, the Tearmoon Empire had been falling apart at the time. She could accept that the masses had good reason to hate those of high birth. She could even stomach the criticism from foreign nations. That was all arguably justified. However... there was one thing that she found utterly intolerable.

I died because you couldn't be bothered to even warn me that I was getting into trouble? Just a quick heads-up would have been enough! You could have, you know, said something *before you started a revolution and dropped a freaking cleaver on my head!*

Surely, all that time they'd spent together at the academy should have earned her at least a word of caution before such drastic measures were undertaken. If he'd just sat her down one day and told her, "Hey, look, we're sick and tired of your attitude," things might have changed for the better. Instead, he'd waited until things were far past the point of no return before gallantly swooping in to save the day and declaring to her that "I had no choice but to bring you to justice!" and "This is the consequence of your own actions!" Just thinking about it made her seethe with anger.

I take back everything good I've ever said about him! He's a terrible person and I hate his guts!

So upset that she had to stop herself from gnashing her teeth, all sorts of thoughts entered her mind. Angry ones, indignant ones, frustrated ones... The one thing that never appeared was any semblance of a plan for what they were supposed to do starting tomorrow.

Chapter 24: Princess Mia... Tries Mushrooms!

Early the next morning, Mia and Sion started walking, using the riverbank as a rough trail. Rather than blindly wandering into the forest, they decided to gamble on the river. Being a water source, there might be a village somewhere along its banks.

Besides, it's a little scary to be somewhere without water.

Having thoroughly experienced the agony of prolonged thirst in the previous timeline, Mia had chosen to stay close to the river. Sion had agreed, but...

Th-This... might have been... a mistake... she thought, regret hitting her with each labored pant.

The riverbank was blanketed with large rocks, and walking over them proved extremely taxing. Though she'd made an effort to improve her stamina in case of an emergency, there were limits to what she could realistically achieve. The rocky, unbeaten path was simply too arduous for the legs of a young girl.

Sweat streamed down her forehead, and her cheeks were flushed with color. Judging by how much her knees were shaking, they might give way at any time.

"Hey, are you okay?"

From atop a boulder, Sion extended a hand. She took it, and with his help, managed to climb up.

"Thanks for the hand, Prince Sion."

She flicked the sweat off her brow before scanning the surroundings. Unfortunately, as far as the eye could see, there were no villages.

"I must say, I wish there was something to ride. I won't go so far as a carriage, but I wish we at least had horses."

"Hm? Ah, right. You know how to ride." He shrugged before continuing. "Not that it's likely to come in handy. I doubt we'll just happen upon a couple of wild horses. Of course, if you're fine with your ride coming in a smaller form..."

“A smaller form?”

“And having it howl at night.”

“Howl... My! Prince Sion! Are you saying you can ride wolves?!”

She was reminded of the wolf-riding prince in Elise’s book. The character had made an impression on her. She stared at Sion, her eyes widening with wonder, only for him to let out a strange choking sound. His hand shot to his mouth. A second later, he broke into a fit of laughter.

“No, I definitely can’t ride wolves,” he said, still chuckling. “Oh, praise the sun, you can be so delightfully gullible sometimes, Princess Mia.”

“What?! You—”

She gave him an angry pufferfish glare.

Stupid Sion! Just because I’m a little naive about these things... I take it back again! I hate everything about him! Not just his guts!

Still, she couldn’t afford to antagonize her only ally, so she decided to direct her displeasure elsewhere.

“...This is all because of those people who attacked our wagon. It’s all their fault,” she muttered.

To her surprise, Sion frowned at that.

“Hm? Is something the matter, Prince Sion?”

“I was just thinking that this whole thing seems a little strange.”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s true that the political instability here in Remno has turned the kingdom into dangerous territory. As such, it’s not exactly surprising for a merchant’s caravan to be attacked. However, the people we ran into back there weren’t regular bandits.”

“Now that you mention it, I do remember someone saying something about assassins.”

“That’s right. They were professionals. Trained killers who knew how to fight. They’re not the kind of people to start roaming around in droves just because public order is on the decline.”

“My! Are you suggesting that someone sent assassins to kill us?”

“Not all of us... Probably either myself or you, though I suppose it could have been Miss Tiona as well...”

Either way, that wagon was filled with high-profile targets. It was no real surprise that a team of assassins had made an attempt on their lives.

“But no one was supposed to know that we were in that wagon,

right? Did information leak somehow?"

"That would indeed be the logical assumption, but..."

Sion trailed off. The contemplative expression on his face suggested he was reflecting on the events in the wagon. Mia, in the meantime, did some contemplating of her own.

Well, if he's offering to do all the thinking, then I guess I don't have to bother.

She quickly arrived at a conclusion: he could do all the mental heavy lifting. She, in the meantime, was going to find something to eat.

What should I do, though? I can't exactly go fishing. What kind of herbs grow along rivers again? Did I see any— My, that's...

Suddenly, the sight of a mushroom growing at the riverside caught her eye. It was a beautiful thing, bright red and shaped like a torch's flame. The next thing she knew, she was crouched beside it with her hand outstretched, about to pluck it from the ground. Just then, she remembered what the head chef had said to her.

"Your Highness, it's fine to be interested in the delicacies of the wild, but please remember one thing. Be very careful with mushrooms, as it's extremely difficult to tell the difference between poisonous ones and safe ones. They're dangerous to all but the most discerning experts, so if at all possible, I urge you to stay away from them."

"So this is a mushroom, huh..."

She retracted her hand, heeding the head chef's warning.

Hold on a minute. Now that I think about it, aren't I an expert? I've done plenty of research on how to survive in the forest too...

The books she'd read, coupled with the experience of having spent one whole night in a forest by herself, instilled in her a bizarre confidence in herself. She *knew* that she'd be able to tell which ones were edible and which ones were not. It was a gut feeling. In other words, a feeling that came from her gut. Which happened to be rather empty at the time.

"I mean, just look at it. It's so pretty. Of course it's edible."

She reached for it again.

"I wouldn't touch that if I were you."

A voice made her jump.

"Mia! Get back!"

"Eh?"

Sion's hand wrapped itself around her arm and tugged her in

his direction. He pulled so forcefully that she almost fell into him. That alone would have made her heart skip a beat, but it was followed by the realization that he'd just called her "Mia." No title. No address. As if they were close friends. Or even...

Granted, they'd talked this over the previous night and decided that in the interest of safety, they'd stop referring to each other by their titles for the time being. She distinctly remembered thinking *Oh, you cheeky little boy! Trying to get all buddy-buddy with me, are you? I see your game!* when he'd brought up the idea last night, but now that she'd actually heard it in person with all the benefits of the audiovisual context...

Th-This is going to give me a heart attack!

With her face red and her heart pounding, she pressed her hands to her cheeks as her disconcerted mind shifted into romance mode so fast it almost snapped its chain. Sion, on the other hand, was fully composed as he stepped forward to shield her. He faced the stranger who had spoken so unexpectedly.

Before them stood a big man with a thick beard. At a glance, he looked like a huntsman of some sort.

"...Or, I suppose, someone merely dressed as one," Sion mused cautiously.

He let out a short sigh. When they'd fallen into the river, he'd thrown away his sword to make it easier to swim. If this man was one of the assassins who had attacked their wagon, Sion would be hard pressed to fight him unarmed. He set his jaw, his eyes hardening with resolve. Mia's safety came first. If push came to shove, he'd hold the man off by any means necessary to buy her time to escape.

To his surprise, the man made no attempt to approach them. He simply pointed at the red mushroom that Mia had been about to pick.

"That, little lady, is called a Salamandrake. It's poisonous and just touching it is enough to give you a rash. You don't wanna find out what happens if you eat it."

"My! Is that true? It looked so pretty, I thought for sure it'd be safe to eat!"

...Mia, seriously?

Sion opened his mouth, reconsidered, closed it again, and looked at his own stomach. He rubbed it, growing a little nervous about all the wild herbs he'd eaten yesterday. For a brief moment,

his trust in the Great Sage of the Empire wavered.

"You kids don't live around 'ere, do you? Where're you from?"

"We're— Mmmfm?"

Sion pressed a palm over Mia's mouth and spoke in her place.

"Who... might you be?"

He quietly studied the ostensible hunter. The man's bearing didn't seem like that of a trained assassin, but he still couldn't let his guard down. If the man turned out to be a bandit, one wrong word could place their lives in danger. He might try to hold them for ransom, or even worse, sell them to slavers.

"Hm? Oh, is this one of those 'tell me your name and I'll tell you mine' things? Heh, you got a point. The name's Muzic. I'm from Doni Village, which is just o'er that way, and I hunt for a living. See?"

He held up something that had been hanging from his waist. It was a large hare with white and black stripes in its fur.

"My! Is that... going to be eaten?"

"Yeah. You wanna try some? They're a real treat."

"That sounds wonderful. I'd certainly like to have some. You see, we've been separated from our friends, and we're terribly hungry."

Isn't she being a little careless?

A wary frown flashed across Sion's brow, but he quickly dismissed the notion. Princess Mia wasn't the kind of person who'd be oblivious to the inherent risks of such a situation. The mushroom incident a moment ago gave him some cause for concern, but he chalked that up to a momentary lapse in judgment caused by an abundance of curiosity. It shouldn't affect her ability to perceive real and imminent danger.

Which means...

He glanced at her face. It showed not the slightest hint of worry. She simply looked at the man, her expression placid.

She's figured that either way, we're not going to get anywhere just walking along the river like this.

He sighed wryly and shook his head.

It looks like she resolved herself long before I did. I'd better step up my game.

He steeled himself and spoke, "We're the children of merchants. We were crossing a bridge when our caravan was attacked by bandits, and we've become separated from our parents," he

explained, presenting Muzic with the story they'd agreed upon beforehand.

"Oh, that right? Must have been tough for you." He shot them a hearty grin. "Why don't you come with me then? My village ain't far."

"I appreciate the offer, but... We need to get to the capital."

"The capital? Then I'll ask around the village for you. See if anyone's goin' soon."

With that, he set off, and Mia and Sion quickly followed.

As most of you have surely guessed, there was nothing in Mia's mental makeup that even remotely resembled resolve. Rather, she'd remembered a passage she'd read in a book about forest survival techniques.

Amongst the foods one can find in a forest, one of the most delectable is the meat of the hare. In particular, stew made from halfmoon hare — recognizable by the pattern of black and white stripes on its fur — deserves special mention for its exquisite flavor.

She swallowed.

Meat of hare... How terribly exciting!

In other words, the only thought underlying her actions was the fact that she was starving.

N-Not that I'm obsessed with food or anything! This is about our health! I just thought that in a situation like this, we'll need to eat some nutritious food to keep us going! That's all!

Her thinly-veiled excuse fooled no one but her own gluttonous self.

Chapter 25: Mia Smacks at Delicious Hare Stew — Her Lips, That Is!

They followed Muzic through the forest, taking narrow animal trails whose winding courses were just as taxing as the rocky riverbank had been. Mia had long passed from the realm of weariness into total exhaustion, but she couldn't afford to be left behind. The dense leafy canopy blocked out the sun, leaving the whole forest in darkness. Every time she walked past a large tree, she couldn't help but wonder if a monster was hiding in its shadow. The thought gnawed at her already frayed nerves and made her tremble in fear.

Now, Mia didn't really believe in monsters and the like, but one did not earn the title of "Chicken-Hearted" by being selective about one's fears. Whether it be a ghost or a wolf, as long as it popped out, she'd react to it with equal and indiscriminate terror.

Which explained how she managed to keep her legs moving. Fatigue was one thing, being left behind in a forest where things could jump out at her from every shadow was another thing entirely. She was going to keep walking if it was the last thing she did. Unbeknownst to her, her display of willpower was the very thing that had doomed her to such prolonged agony.

Well, color me surprised, thought Sion as he glanced at Mia's plodding figure trailing behind him. *I figured we'd need to take a break at some point, but she's surprisingly hardy. I know she said she joined the horsemanship club, but that is some impressive stamina. I swear, Mia... Every time I look at you, I'm reminded not to rest on my laurels.*

"My, are those lights I see? They're terribly pretty... and they follow me wherever I look..."

Just as Mia began mumbling the sort of things that would make medical professionals concerned, the two forms in front of her stopped.

"We're 'ere."

She looked up to find the oppressing corridors of trees give way to a wide clearing dotted with about a dozen houses that made up the small village of Doni. They were all made of wood, and none were particularly fancy.

Mostly a gathering of hunters and loggers, it looks like... thought Sion as he scanned the village.

"My place is o'er there, see? That one with the round roof."

Muzic pointed at a modest shack no different from any of the others.

"The capital's gonna have to wait 'til tomorrow. It's already late. You can stay with me."

Sion let out a breath of relief at this offer. *Good. We'll have a roof to sleep under tonight.*

Then, it occurred to him that Mia might not share his relief. Having gone on hunting trips before, he was accustomed to spending nights in small shacks like these. Mia, Princess of the Tearmoon Empire, might not be as flexible. He glanced at her, expecting to see disappointment, or maybe even disgust, on her face...

"How do you eat hares? Do you roast them over a spit?"

"Sure, they taste great that way. But today, I'm thinking we use this 'ere pot to stew the thing. I've got some veggies I can put in, too."

"My! Stewed hare! That sounds wonderful! Oh, what if we also add some mushrooms ..."

"Whoa, hold on there, little lady. Mushrooms're a real devil to tell apart. Don't touch'em unless you really know what you're doin'. You'll regret it otherwise."

"Could you teach me which ones are edible, then? There's someone I very much wish to cook for."

Her eyes glowed with enthusiasm as she continued to discuss the nuances of cooking with Muzic. She barely even seemed to notice the poor quality of the shack, much less be bothered by it.

Well, so much for worrying about her delicate sensibilities. She didn't seem to mind camping out in the open either. I wonder if she's actually the hardy outdoors sort.

With a resigned smile, he watched her for a little longer. Then he turned to Muzic.

"Things are getting a little messy here, aren't they?"

"Hm? What things?"

“Isn’t civil war about to break out?”

“Huh. You got good ears. Yeah, word is that some town somewhere is raising a ruckus o’er something stupid.”

“...Something stupid? Has it not impacted this area?”

“Dunno. Haven’t heard much ’round these parts. ’Sides, we’re all country folk here. We got our hands full just looking after ourselves,” he said, letting out a big laugh.

Sion furrowed his brow. *This isn’t matching what I read in the report... I was under the impression a revolution was consuming the whole kingdom.*

According to the intelligence he’d received, the King of Remno had imposed heavy taxes to fund an expansion of military armaments, which pushed his people, unable to suffer more burden, to rise up in anger.

Is it because... this place is just too far? And the fires of revolution haven’t reached this remote settlement along the border?

He pursed his lips, perplexed by the mismatch between what he’d heard and what he saw.

Mia, meanwhile, also pursed her lips. Except in her case, she was bringing a wooden bowl full of hare stew to them. She tipped it a little and felt the warm liquid flow over her tongue.

No wonder the book mentioned this. It’s absolutely delicious!

A tender piece of meat rolled into her mouth and promptly melted into a wave of gamy savoriness that washed over her taste buds, which was soon complemented by the rich flavors of mountain vegetables. The experience was so satisfying that she smacked her lips in sheer scrumptious pleasure. As she drank down the stew, its heat spread throughout her body. With the burgeoning sense of warmth, however, came a realization.

“...Something’s not right.”

She stared at the hare stew in her bowl, studying it carefully.

“This is food. And there seems to be plenty of it...”

It was, perhaps, an obvious observation. The famine that would eventually sweep over the continent wasn’t due to happen for another few years. There was no shortage of food right now, and therefore, nothing about this scene was out of the ordinary.

“But still... something’s not right.”

It might have been a fleeting feeling, a passing thought, but it left behind an unease— No, the seeds of unease, yet to sprout.

Nevertheless, she couldn't seem to get it out of her mind.

"Ahh... I want some sweets," she murmured as she plopped another piece of hare meat into her mouth. "Mmm, delicious. But still, I want something sweet..."

Hardy or not, she was still a princess, and she was going to crave her sugar.

Chapter 26: Anne's Trust and the Path to a Miracle

While Mia was busy smacking her lips at delicious hare stew, Anne had finally made it back to Tearmoon. Though fatigued from the long journey, she eschewed rest in favor of efficiency and immediately went to see Ludwig, recounting to him in detail the actions that Mia had taken.

"My God..."

After hearing her report, Ludwig threw back his head and let out a deep sigh.

"Her Highness, she... I'd heard about the riots in Remno, but... Damn it, I forgot one of her classmates is there. I should have known..."

He cursed his own carelessness and rose from his chair.

"I can't move the army right now or they'll think we're planning an invasion. Which leaves..."

His first thought had been the Princess Guard, but they were part of the army. If he couldn't send them to ensure Mia's safety, then he'd have to find something of equal caliber. Something — he realized a few beats later — or someone...

"And that's when you thought of me, huh," said Dion after hearing the story from Ludwig and Anne. He shrugged. "Gotta say, our princess is just a bundle of excitement, isn't she?"

Contrary to Dion's gleeful grin, Ludwig looked like he'd just swallowed a fly.

"This is no laughing matter. If something's happened to Her Highness... Augh, just thinking about it is giving me the chills."

"Relax. She'll be fine. You said the Sunkland prince is with her, right? I heard that kid's got a mean sword arm. As long as they don't run into some crazy bastard like me, they'll be fine. Probably."

"In any other situation, I'd agree with you, but something's not sitting right with me... The Kingdom of Remno is in no way on the

brink of a revolution."

"Huh?" Anne blinked at him. "Um, what do you mean?"

Ludwig paused, collecting his thoughts before continuing.

"Revolutions are risky. Very risky. Failure means everyone involved gets sent straight to the gallows. It doesn't make sense for anyone to take such a risk unless they had no other choice."

"Um..."

Anne seemed lost. Dion, however, smiled and continued Ludwig's train of thought.

"And by 'no other choice,' you mean they're already dying. Only people whose lives are already a living hell would rebel against the Crown. If they succeed, they change everything. If they fail, well, the worst that'll happen is they die a little sooner."

"A-Ah, I see. So you're saying Remno isn't *that* bad right now?"

"According to our intelligence, anyway..."

In an effort to be more useful to Mia, Ludwig had been steadily expanding his network of connections in the government. While he was no spymaster, he had access to enough information to have a decent grasp on the general state of affairs in foreign kingdoms.

"I did some investigating of my own," he continued, "and while it's true that the tax hike is causing tension, its effects shouldn't be catastrophic. Not until later, at least." He crossed his arms. "What we're faced with is a revolution that never should have occurred, but did. And that makes me suspect sabotage."

"Not just a fire, but arson," said Dion, still grinning. "I see what you're getting at. This revolution is artificial. Someone grabbed a bunch of people, lit a fire under their asses, and is now fanning the flames. Hah, you're right! That does sound like a dangerous place!"

"Then that means it can also be stopped..." Anne proposed.

If someone was deliberately inciting the riots, then they simply needed to be caught. It occurred to her that Mia might have realized that and felt intervention was possible.

"Eh, fat chance that's gonna happen." Dion shook his head. "I guess it's *technically* possible, at least before any blood is spilled."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Death accelerates conflict. It pushes things past the point of no return."

He wasn't speaking from a moral standpoint. It was a pragmatic observation of cause and effect. Death was irreversible. Ergo, so were its consequences.

“I see. Is that why you didn’t take any action against the Lulu tribe?”

“The Lulu tribe? Huh... Not exactly. But I did want to keep casualties to a minimum, so I didn’t sow a bunch of seeds of hatred that might come back to bite me later.” He grimaced. “The thing about the princess that impressed me was how fast she acted after hearing Viscount Berman’s story. If even a single person died, that conflict would not have been resolved so cleanly. Once death enters the picture, the conflict will detach from the problems that caused it in the first place. The violence it spawns will become self-propagating, leaving neither side the option to back down. But the princess didn’t let that happen. She swooped in and mitigated the danger by pushing the two sides apart before it was too late. Then she went straight to the root of the conflict and solved it. It was remarkable stuff, really. A masterclass in problem-solving.”

“Mia...”

Anne murmured the name of her dear mistress, feeling her chest tighten as she gazed into the distance.

“Which brings us back to your original question. See, if the princess wants to settle this conflict as tidily as last time, she’s gonna have to get to the root of the problem and eliminate it without a single death in either the Remno army or the revolutionaries. That sounds a little impossible, don’t you think?”

It was a ridiculous thought, so removed from the constraints of reality that both Ludwig and Dion dismissed it as absurd. There was, however, one person who did not.

“Even so, Her Highness... She can...” Anne whispered to herself.

The next day, the three of them set off for Remno.

The seed of miracles that Mia had unwittingly planted would go on to sprout in the heart of the saboteur fanning the revolution’s flames. Not a soul yet knew what kind of flower it would ultimately yield.

Chapter 27: Forward, Diamond Legion!

After two days of rest and recuperation in the village, Mia and Sion were introduced to a merchant who was heading to a neighboring settlement.

"Watch yourselves out there, you hear?" shouted Muzic.

Mia waved back at him as they departed the village.

"He's been so terribly helpful these past few days. I wish we could repay him somehow," said Mia. When she received no response, she glanced at Sion, who was muttering under his breath.

"I sure hope the others are okay..." There was a hint of concern in his voice. At first, Mia frowned quizzically at him. Then, she remembered.

Ah, that's right. Of course...

The reason they were here in the first place was the assault on their wagon by assassins. They had no idea what had happened to the wagon afterwards nor whether Keithwood and Tiona were safe.

Hm? Wait a minute. Why does it matter to me whether those two are safe?

They were, after all, two of her archenemies. Their well-being hardly seemed worthy of her concern. But, after mulling over it some more, she reconsidered. *On second thought... I guess I can spare a moment to pray for their safety.*

Keithwood was probably a cherished friend of Sion's. Their bond reminded her of the one she shared with her most loyal subject, Anne.

Hmph, I didn't expect there to be such a human side to him. How surprising.

The earnestness of their friendship struck a chord with her, and she decided that she was willing to stomach the thought of wishing for their safety.

Besides, they were using the Forkroads' wagon, and I'd feel terrible for Chloe if something happened to it. While I pray for the driver, I

suppose I can spare a second to mention their names as well. Plus, I sort of owe Keithwood one for helping us with the sandwiches, and the same goes for Tiona—

"...because if we run into those assassins again, I'm going to have a hard time fighting them off by myself."

Her thoughts were interrupted by the second half of Sion's sentence.

"Uh... Would you mind if I asked how hard of a time, exactly?"

"...I intend to do everything in my power to try and make sure you can get away safely. With some luck I might even succeed."

Keithwood! Sweet moons, Keithwood! Please be safe! And come back to us!

For the second time on her journey, Mia willed an earnest prayer toward the sky. It wasn't quite as wistful as the first one, but it was certainly more desperate.

"I must say though, this place seems rather peaceful."

They'd been making their way down a road, having left the forest, and half a day had passed without incident. The scenery was stereotypically rural, and the faces of the passersby were all friendly and placid. At no point did anything suggest the kingdom was about to descend into chaos.

"This area is great for us merchants. There aren't any bandits around, so it's easy to get around."

"...But there's basically a civil war going on, isn't there?"

The merchant shrugged with disinterest.

"Doesn't mean much to us here. I did hear there's an uprising in one of Count Donovan's towns though. Rumors are that the Diamond Legion was sent in to squash them."

"The Diamond Legion? But those are elite troops... There won't even be a fight. It'll just be a massacre," said Sion in astonishment.

"The... Diamond Legion? What might that be?"

He glanced at the innocent curiosity on Mia's face and grimaced.

"It's an elite squadron formed under a direct order from the current King."

The Diamond Legion was an infantry unit created through royal decree by the reigning King of Remno. *"It shall be the strongest heavy infantry unit in the world, composed only of soldiers who are each a match for a thousand men!"*

Recruiting efforts had begun ten years ago. In order to meet the king's demand, all previous enlisting restrictions were waived. Anyone, regardless of birth, nationality, or even criminal background, was eligible to apply. They searched high and low for people of immense stature and wide frame, bringing in giants from both at home and aboard. These men were subjected to stringent selection exams. Successful candidates were then put through rigorous military training to drill them into elite soldiers. The result of all this was the creation of a terrifying army of hulking musclemen, each highly skilled and built like a tank.

"I've heard that Diamond Legionnaires don metal armor from head to toe and hold massive battle axes, which they can swing around easily with just one hand."

Sion spoke with grave import, whereas Mia listened with dreamy fascination.

They... They sound so strong! My!

In general, Mia had a positive impression of big men. Based on previous experiences — the head chef and Dion's vice-captain, for example — for whatever reason, she got along well with them.

I wonder if I can recruit a few of them into my Princess Guard...

"The damage they will do... By the sun, the fallout will be unimaginable."

The revolutionaries were still citizens. They were Remno's own people, who had risen up because they could no longer endure the heavy burden of taxes imposed upon them. The king, however, had chosen suppression. And not only that, but suppression through the most brutal of means — violent, overwhelming military power. It was a fact that did not sit well with Sion, who felt his stomach roil in anger at Remno's reigning ruler.

Yes, in order to uphold the sovereignty of a monarch, rebellions must be quelled swiftly and sternly. He understood that. Yes, in order to minimize casualties to the army, overwhelming the enemy in power and numbers was necessary. He understood that as well. But there was a limit to these things. There had to be.

The Diamond Legion was a military force of the highest caliber. They were a weapon of mass destruction, and this destructive potential should be directed outwards against the trained armies of foreign kingdoms. Moreover, assuming he remembered correctly, this was their maiden campaign, and morale would doubtless be high. An elite squadron seeing action for the first time was going to

be hungry for glory. And blood.

He looked at Mia, perplexed by the bright smile she continued to wear. How could she, knowing the bloodbath that was taking place, appear entirely unbothered? He gleaned no further insight from her face, so he grudgingly turned the conversation back to the merchant, who — to Sion's great surprise — promptly gave him his answer.

"So, how bad is it? How much damage has been done?"

"None, according to what I've heard."

"...What?"

"Apparently, there hasn't been any actual fighting yet. I mean, they *are* the Diamond Legion, after all. Diamonds are pricey."

That was all Sion needed to hear to put all the pieces together. He immediately realized what was happening. At the same time, a paralyzing chill of shock and awe ran up his spine.

N-No way... Are you telling me Mia figured all this out already? Is that why she was smiling?

The situation, meanwhile, proceeded in a direction that no one had foreseen.

Chapter 28: The Schemer is Flustered!

How did this happen?!

The man known within the Kingdom of Remno as Graham was on the verge of a nervous breakdown. He'd been contacted by his associates currently working undercover in Tearmoon, who informed him that efforts to sabotage the empire had failed and that he was to proceed with the plan in Remno early.

Are you freaking kidding me?!

Originally, the plan to bring down the Remno monarchy through the chaos of revolution was to be put into motion *after* the Tearmoon Empire had fallen. It was meant to be slow and pernicious, taking a good ten years or more, and would have gradually eaten away at Remno's foundations by spoiling its lands and corrupting its government. Only after the kingdom was resting on a fertile humus of its own decay would they water it with the blood of its people and watch the wild germination of revolution. Then, after all this was accomplished, they would finally reap the rewards of their long-awaited harvest. Except now they were telling him to get on with things right away. The plan was designed to unfold over a decade. How the hell was it supposed to work with so little time?

But I have to... I'll have to make *it work. We have no choice.*

If they didn't act now, all their plans — everything they'd worked toward — was at risk of being dismantled by the Great Sage of the Empire. It'd taken them so long, but they'd finally managed to infiltrate the Remno government. They were going to be the seeds of ruin that sucked the kingdom dry of its life, only now they were staring down the blade of a massive plow that threatened to unearth them all in one fell swoop. He pressed at his throbbing temples, trying to keep the growing sense of panic at bay.

What in the world was making him so desperate? The cause lay in a series of letters — that's right, the chain of correspondence Mia and Abel had been secretly engaging in since they parted ways for the summer holidays.

Graham and his fellow agents had embedded themselves deep in Remno's government. There were limits to what information they could access — official missives from the King, for example, were beyond their reach — but spying on private correspondence between princes and princesses was comparatively trivial. And when they opened those letters and read their contents... they were baffled. Because what they found were love letters. Just regular love letters, filled with the awkward sentimentality of youthful inexperience and expressed in language so banal one wondered if the writers understood love at all.

Faced with such trifling content, letting out a collective sigh of relief, patting each other on the backs, and not giving the letters a second thought... were, of course, the kinds of things they absolutely didn't do. Rather, they only grew more suspicious. They stared at the letters, thoroughly discombobulated by how innocuous they seemed.

"This is Princess Mia we're talking about. Is she really the kind of person who'd write such cheesy letters?"

She didn't write just one either. She kept writing them. Very frequently. The blistering pace at which she was exchanging letters with Abel was entirely abnormal. If they'd been dealing with a regular girl, none of this would have been remarkable, but they were up against the Great Sage of the Empire. None of them believed for a moment that these were plain old love letters. As a result, they redoubled their efforts to decode the messages that were undoubtedly hidden within the ostensibly innocent passages. To their endless dismay, they could find nothing — no patterns, no ciphers, no double-entendres.

No matter how hard they stared at the pages, the words failed to reveal anything but the mutual affection of their authors. They even considered the possibility of invisible ink, which could be revealed by applying heat, but they ultimately decided to forgo testing. After all, anyone who received a browned letter was going to realize that someone had been snooping through their correspondence. If they blew their cover, their slow and arduous infiltration of Remno would have been in vain. Not to mention, if they hadn't found anything after all that, they would have jumped off a cliff in frustration.

Abel's present for Mia confused them even more. Who'd send a teenage girl horse shampoo as a gift? Surely, they figured, this was

some sort of message. Was it a directive for the cavalry? Or maybe a suggestion to amass warhorses? Addled, exhausted, and out of ideas, one of them even tried to pour the shampoo on the letter in the desperate hope that words would appear. To their collective relief, his attempt was foiled. Had they heard from their co-conspirators in Saint-Noel that the two lovebirds had spent a lot of time together in the horsemanship club, they might have been a little less bewildered, but even spies had communication difficulties. The end result was that none of them had any idea what was being discussed through the letters.

"We know one thing for certain, though." There was definitely information of a highly confidential nature being exchanged between Prince Abel and Princess Mia, the latter of whom was the very person who'd dismantled with masterful precision their meticulous and long-running plan to topple the Tearmoon Empire.

"We have to do this... and we have to move *now*, before it's too late... before this Great Sage ruins everything."

In a fit of desperation, they'd hit the go button on their plans far earlier than they'd originally intended.

The first stage of their plan was to identify a representative for the masses who supported them and spoke on their behalf. Then they needed to either kidnap or assassinate this individual. In Tearmoon, this role would have been played by Outcount Rudolvon. In Remno, it was taken up by the chancellor, Count Dasayev Donovan, who had a reputation for being upright and sensible. The veteran politician, on the verge of turning sixty and concerned with the well-being of his people, had voiced his opposition to the king's decree to raise taxes to bolster the military. That made him the perfect target to kidnap.

Meanwhile, they'd spread rumors about the king imprisoning the old minister for standing up to him. Next, they'd approach those they'd previously taken note of as holding grudges against the Remno government and stir up their anger, pushing them to revolt. Their demands would be simple, there was no need at the outset for lofty goals like overthrowing the government.

"We're fighting to get our beloved lord back. We demand the safe return of the man who was our voice."

Placed on the moral high ground, the rioters would feel their actions justified, greatly enhancing the movement's persuasive

potential. Once they built up enough momentum, their angry activists would move to occupy a town within Count Donovan's jurisdiction. In response, the Remno government would have to send in troops to suppress the rebellion. Should the revolutionaries win the ensuing battle, the rest would be easy; they'd loudly announce their victory to the rest of the kingdom and appeal to the masses to join their cause. Conversely, if the army successfully crushed the rebellion, they could simply denounce the government for its cruel act of suppression. Once the news spread, it would feed into the simmering anger harbored by the people until the fires of revolution began burning throughout the kingdom.

So far, both the first and second parts of the plan — the kidnapping and the occupation — had gone without a hitch.

"...Or so we think. Did it really go that smoothly?" murmured Graham as he scanned the reports from his fellow agents.

Something didn't feel right.

"Peaceful surrender of local government facilities... Nonviolent disarmament of guards... The results so far are definitely ideal, but..."

He couldn't shake the feeling that he was somehow being manipulated, as if this was all a game, and he was not a player, but a mere piece on its board.

Chapter 29: Soldiers of Diamond

The peaceful surrender of local government facilities and the nonviolent disarmament of their guards was the best-case scenario as laid out by the revolution's leadership. The guards in Remno's smaller towns were mostly residents, born and raised where they worked.

The basic strategic principle underlying this arrangement was that in the case of foreign invasion, the local garrison would fight to buy time for the government to assemble and dispatch a rapid response force. The fear was that if the garrison were manned with troops from elsewhere, they might flee as soon as the tides turned against them. Even if they stayed and fought, morale was likely to be low. Swap them out for locals and things would be different. Knowing that they were defending their homes and loved ones, they would surely fight to the bitter end.

This system, however, had a glaring weakness when it came to defending the town against an uprising of its own people. Faced with friends and family rising up in protest against heavy taxes and famine, how many guards would draw their swords? Who would fight their own brothers and sisters to protect the monarchy that caused their suffering?

The answer was no one. Not only would they not fight, they would probably join their brethren and add their voices to the growing roar of revolution. The guards, therefore, had great strategic value. It was highly likely that they would align themselves with the revolutionaries and bolster their forces, so, ideally, the goal was to capture them unharmed. This meant that during the initial uprising, the revolters wished to prevent casualties on both sides. The last thing they wanted was a war of attrition, which would put a grassroots militia like them at a disadvantage compared to the well-supplied national army.

All things considered, a peaceful surrender was the ideal result. The leaders of the revolution had followed Graham's instructions and — technically, at least — done exactly as they'd been told.

“But the plan was designed with the assumption that heavy taxation would already have led to an impoverished and exhausted population...”

Graham slammed his elbows on his desk and ran both hands through his hair. With its prerequisites unsatisfied, the plan couldn’t possibly work as intended. Heavy taxation hadn’t had time to take its toll. No one had lost a loved one to starvation. No one had fallen into poverty. No one had *suffered* yet. Consequently, deep-seated hatred toward the monarchy failed to materialize. Currently, it was just a bunch of very loud protesters who’d barged into the government offices and camped out. Their displeasure, unmagnified by loss or bloodshed, bore little weight.

“...This is a farce,” he said, slamming the pages he held onto the desk. “This is all a damn farce!”

According to the report, the atmosphere among the revolters resembled revelry more than revolution. He almost wished they would have murdered one of the royal messengers or bathed the town in the blood of the guards, but none of them had gone to such lengths. Without the fuel of anger and hatred, their passions simply didn’t burn hot enough to produce the kind of bloody, destructive potential that could overthrow a monarchy. If the soldiers sent to stamp out the rebellion had a commander worth even a grain of salt, he’d laugh his head off the second he set eyes on this so-called rebel army. Then he’d stroll in and ask them to disband. With maybe a stern voice for good measure. At this rate, the fire of revolution was hardly going to consume the kingdom; it was about to be doused in its first town.

“But... there’s still a chance. I can still turn this around...”

What he needed was an atrocity — an act of violence against the rebel army so utterly senseless that it would incite in the general populace hatred and outrage against the government. The thought led him to remember the incident that had taken place in the Sealence Forest, during which the Great Sage of the Empire, Mia Luna Tearmoon, had worked a literal miracle.

An experienced commander had been abstaining from open violence, at which point Princess Mia arrived at the scene and forced the army to retreat, thereby defusing tensions. Furthermore, in a display of courage unimaginable from a girl her age, she marched into the Lulu village with minimal escort and engaged in face-to-face negotiation with the chieftain. She resolved the conflict

with ease, neatly tying up every loose thread that might have led to future trouble.

"There's no way she can pull something like that off again..."

His primary focus was making sure a battle occurred. Anyone who'd lost family was not going to be swayed by a few placating words. Once that happened, even the Great Sage of the Empire — with all her craft and cunning — couldn't hope to turn back the clock and have everything revert to normal. This time, there would be no miracle. He would make sure of it.

He had no intention of making the same mistake twice. To that end, he turned his attention to the Diamond Legion. Their qualities: sufficiently powerful to commit a brutal massacre, devoid of the experience necessary to accurately gauge their opponent's strength, and most importantly, hungry for glory on their maiden campaign. They were the *perfect* instrument.

And that's why, when Graham joined the King of Remno and his officers at their military meeting, he spoke with the confidence of a man with a plan.

"Consider please, Your Majesty, the fact that these impudent knaves respect not the king's law. Is there, then, a more fitting instrument to deliver justice than the king's sword — the Diamond Legion?"

A round of talking arose at his suggestion that quickly converged into agreement.

"That's a brilliant idea."

"Yes. Fitting indeed."

Voices of support chimed in unison.

"Will Your Majesty's renowned Diamond Legion be dispatched to its glorious maiden campaign?"

The King of Remno nodded in assent. "Let it be so. Goriall, Commander of the Diamond Legion, I hereby command you to crush these insolent fools who dare call themselves the revolutionary army!"

"Yes, Your Majesty!"

Goriall's heart soared at the king's order.

"I swear upon my honor that I shall present you with the head of every last rebel."

"Excellent. I look forward to your triumphant return. By the way, Goriall..."

“Yes, Your Majesty?”

The king waved his hand, bidding Goriall to come closer. He obliged, approaching with quiet steps and pausing for permission before leaning in.

“As I’m sure you’re aware,” whispered the king, “it has taken me a decade to find and train the elite soldiers that bear the Diamond Legion’s banner. You and your men are my pride and joy.”

“I’m honored beyond words, Your Majesty.”

Goriall blinked away a tear. The amount of trust the king had in him and his men moved him deeply, and he pressed his lips together in an effort to stop them from quivering. He was halfway through a silent oath in his heart to repay the king’s favor when he heard something that gave him pause.

“Indeed, you are precious...” the king continued. “Very precious. That’s why, Goriall, I expect you to return victorious and with every last one of your soldiers unharmed.”

“Yes, Your Maj— Huh?”

The commander did a double take, wondering if his ears had deceived him. The king’s next words, however, confirmed that his ears were being perfectly honest.

“Every last one, Commander. I want them all back undamaged. I don’t mind a couple scrapes and bruises, but death is out of the question, as is any injury serious enough to end their careers as soldiers.”

For a long time, Goriall simply stared at the king, unsure how to respond.

Why did the king make such a demand? The reason was quite simple. Suppose, for example, that there existed a suit of armor made of diamond. It’s strong and impenetrable, functionally superb. But, would *you* wear it into battle? Probably not, right? Because it’s too damn expensive. You wouldn’t want to scratch it for fear of damaging its value.

...Essentially, it’s worth more sitting in a vault than being used.

Apply this logic, then, to a legion of men, each of whom possesses a largeness of frame and stature so rare that they’re inherently valuable. Add to that years of specialized training, producing elite soldiers of such great value that every one of them is worth their weight in diamonds. Suppose again that this Diamond Legion is sent to quell a local uprising. Would you be willing to risk

losing some of those precious men, each of whom represents thousands of gold coins?

Goriall, therefore, was faced with the impossible task of slaying all their enemies without losing a single man in the process. He thought and thought, wracking his brains for a solution... that simply didn't exist.

Chapter 30: Princess Mia… Is Kidnapped!

It's not hard to work through the logic and realize the king would be reluctant to send his precious Diamond Legion into battle… but to figure all that out in an instant? Truly, Mia, you never fail to impress…

His respect in her renewed, Sion glanced at Mia, who wore a vacuous smile as she waved at the departing merchant. There was no glimmer of intelligence in her eyes. No aura of acumen. If he had to describe her current expression, it would be…

Never mind. Why use the word when I know it to be untrue? But I must admit, this has been an enlightening experience. I've heard it said that the wise lion hides its claws, but this is the first time I've seen that saying in action…

He studied her face.

I see… So this is the mask she wears to feign daftness. She does it so well.

"Thank you very much. Please give Muzic my regards."

"Will do. Hope you find your friends, young lady."

Mia gave the merchant a few more enthusiastic waves before turning to Sion.

"By the way, it's good and all that we've reached a town, but what do we do from here?" she asked with a wide-eyed expression so devoid of thought that, even knowing it was an act, it could still have fooled him.

"Let's see… Preferably, we first meet up with the others."

In preparation of an event like this separating them, they'd decided on a rendezvous point beforehand. According to the merchant, it would take them another half day by wagon to reach that predetermined spot.

"Fortunately, passenger wagons stop here on a regular basis, but…" muttered Sion with a hint of dismay.

"My, Sion," said Mia, a mischievous grin spreading across her face. "Are you broke?"

“I’m not broke. It’s just that Keithwood usually handles all the matters concerning money.”

“My!”

She brought a hand to her lips in an exaggerated gesture of astonishment before giggling.

“You’re such a child. Fortunately, one of us at least is responsible enough to handle money.”

She crouched down and promptly proceeded to pull down her white socks, revealing the peachy skin of her calves, onto which six silver coins were glued — three on each leg.

“What… are those?”

“Emergency funds. I tried putting them in my shoes, but that made it terribly uncomfortable to walk.”

The attempt had almost given her blisters. It was extremely unpleasant.

“Okay… but why *there*?”

“So it’s hard for people to steal, obviously!”

The idea came from past experience. When she’d been captured by the revolutionary army in the previous timeline, they’d stripped her clean of everything valuable. They even took the bag of gold coins she’d so carefully hidden.

“I-I don’t have anything else on me! Honest!”

“Oh yeah? Jump for me then.”

Jangle jangle.

“I hear them jangling, you filthy liar. Hand them over already! Come on!”

She’d never imagined coins could be discovered in such a fashion.

Who would have known a method like that existed… I mean, it was *pretty clever, but still! That got on my nerves!*

She still remembered the belittling grin the soldier had worn as he prodded at her to jump. Just thinking about it made her angry.

In any case, that’s the last time I’m going to fall for such a humiliating trick! I need a place that won’t make a sound… A place they didn’t check before but is still easily accessible… It has to be inside my socks then, right?

The statement that she was devoid of thought was therefore technically untrue, because she did, in fact, from time to time engage in a tiny bit of thinking. To her further credit, she’d even collected coinage from neighboring nations to ensure she could

make a smooth escape when the revolution happened. Ludwig, bless his deluded soul, had thought she was looking into the gold content of foreign currency to deepen her geopolitical understanding and spent a good few days appreciating her studiousness. He was dead wrong, of course, but the point is, Mia actually had the forethought to bring Remno currency with her.

To be honest, I really wanted to give one of these to Muzic as thanks... thought Mia as she ran her fingers over the coins in her hand with the tenderness of a mother caressing her children.

"Do you think these are enough to pay for our trip?"

"Always prepared, aren't you?" said Sion. He peered at the silvers she held and frowned, uncertainty creeping into his voice. "That's... probably enough, I think."

They were, after all, the Prince of Sunkland and the Princess of Tearmoon. Neither had the foggiest clue what the average market rate of a wagon ride was supposed to be. In Mia's case, her emergency escape plan had involved bringing Anne and Ludwig along, so she hadn't bothered to personally look into the detailed costs of travel.

"May I leave the negotiations to you?" asked Mia.

"Yes, please. Otherwise, a lady will have paid my way while I stood around doing nothing, and that's not very gentlemanly. Do let me have my moment in the sun."

Despite his bravado, his confidence was clearly lacking. Mia found this rare display of vulnerability surprisingly endearing.

Hehehe... So, Mr. Perfect, it looks like you have your weaknesses too.

She watched from behind as he approached the driver. Then, all of a sudden, she felt a pair of arms lift her up.

"Huh? Wha— Mmmfmm!?"

An oddly moist cloth was pressed over her mouth. She flailed her limbs in the air, but a sweet aroma soon entered her nose, and her mind began to fog.

"Hurry up, before the other kid comes back."

She distantly felt herself being carried away as her addled brain tried to make sense of her situation.

M-My... Does this mean... I'm in trouble?

"Mia?! Hey, you! Damn it!"

Sion's voice echoed, but it sounded so far away...

Then everything faded to black.

Mia woke to the sensation of being shaken.

"Mmm... Hm?"

She slowly opened her eyes. Her vision was hazy, so she moved to rub her eyes... only to discover her arms wouldn't budge. They remained behind her, firmly bound at the wrists with rope that dug into her skin and made her wince. With no other option, she kept blinking until she could see clearly before taking a look at her surroundings. She didn't recognize the room. It was large, but the dusty floor wasn't enjoyable to lie on.

"Wh-Where am I?"

"Hey, you're awake."

A voice sounded overhead.

Why am I— Oh! I remember! Someone caught me and...

Memories of the attack on their wagon resurfaced in her mind.

Don't tell me... Did I run right into those assassins?

She tensed at the thought, but the two figures who appeared were boys only a little older than her. They looked to be about sixteen or seventeen and were the kind of ordinary kids you'd see walking around in most towns.

Hm... Maybe not, she thought, relaxing again.

"Hey, miss, you got any money on you? Gold, silver, whatever is fine. Judging by what you're wearing, you must be from a family of merchants or something, right? You probably have some jewelry and stuff..."

His words immediately evoked visions of her capture by the revolutionary army during the previous timeline. She recalled the man making her jump on the spot and hearing the clinking of coins. She also recalled the downright *humiliating* way he'd looked at her, as if she was daft beyond belief.

"No, I don't."

She would have crossed her arms, but they were still tied behind her back, so she settled for turning her face away.

"Really? All right, why don't you try jumping for us then?"

"Hmph. Fine. Watch me."

She got up and gave the boy a smug look before hopping a few times on the spot. Obviously, they heard nothing.

Hah, silly children, thinking you'd get me with such a simple trick. Do you really think I'd hide important things in a place where they'd make noise—

“The shoes and socks then. It’s the first place little kids think of when they want to hide things. Better check there.”

“What?!”

Alas, any idea that came out of her head was doomed to be mediocre at best, and her plan was foiled within seconds. To add insult to injury, they’d called her brilliant hiding spot “the first place little kids think of.” It was downright humiliating. Again.

The kids paid little attention to her mental anguish as they pulled her shoes off, stripped her of her socks, and checked both. They found nothing, of course, as the coins had already been given to Sion.

“Seriously? We drew a blank? Damn it.”

“Well, I guess if you really think about it, no one’s gonna let a kid like this keep any money.”

“I told you so! Hmph! Serves you right!” exclaimed Mia in a pitiful attempt to save some face.

“Cheeky little kid… We should sell you to a slaver— Ow!”

There were two sharp thwacks, and the boys wailed simultaneously in pain.

“You two! Do you think it’s funny to pick on someone so young?”

Behind the boys appeared a girl who was about the same age as them. She ran one hand through her shoulder-length hair as she let out an exasperated sigh. In her other hand she held a well-worn shoe that had probably been on her foot before it was employed for a different purpose.

“L-Lynsha, um... We just thought, if we scared her a little, she might cough up some cash...”

The boys’ hasty excuse earned each of them another smack on the head.

“Jem’s order was to bring the girl to him, right? So stop standing around and get on with it already.”

“G-Get on what?”

She gave them a flat look.

“What, are you going to carry her there like a sack of potatoes? There should be a wagon out there we can use, so go get ready. There are preparations we have to make before the big moment, and we need manpower. Go check on that side of things too.”

“Fine. Don’t let her get away though.”

After watching the boys reluctantly make their way outside, Lynsha turned back toward Mia.

“So... Who are you supposed to be?”

“I’m...”

Mia took a moment to consider her answer. Even she could see that blurting out her true identity was going to put her in danger. The more she thought about it, though, the more she felt like she was in plenty of danger already.

I mean, they did say something about selling me to slavers...

The thought scared her a little, giving her brain the kick it needed to get its gears spinning.

Wh-What’s the correct answer here?

She looked down at the floor and mulled over her options. A brief silence ensued. Lynsha let out a sigh.

“Not gonna tell? Whatever. Fine by me. If anything, it’d be a little worrying if you actually started blabbing in a situation like this...”

She proceeded to pull a knife out from her pocket.

“Don’t move.”

“...Huh?”

Mia’s mind went blank. She simply gaped at the sharp point of the knife as it neared, rose, and fell.

Shiiick!

The rope around her wrists fell severed to the ground.

“Eh? Uh... Huh?”

She held up her hands, closing and opening them in stunned disbelief. She lowered them to find Lynsha looking at her.

"Hey, do you think you can stop this revolution?" The girl's expression was serious. "If you can... Please. Save my brother."

There was a desperation in her voice, almost as if she were appealing to anyone willing to listen.

"Stop this revolution? Save your brother? Whatever are you talking about?" asked Mia as she nursed her reddened wrists.

"There's no time. We have to leave. Put your shoes on and come with me. We'll walk and talk."

Mia did as she was told, following Lynsha out into a shadowy alleyway.

"Where are we?"

"One of the bases of the underground revolutionaries. This is a pretty rough neighborhood, so stay close to me."

"O-Okay—" Mia paused in the middle of nodding. A frown creased her brow. "Wait... Revolutionaries? Um, if you don't mind my asking, by 'revolutionaries,' would you happen to be referring to the people currently causing a lot of commotion here in Remno?"

A few seconds passed before Lynsha nodded.

"Yeah, our *comrades*. We threw in with their lot." Her voice was weak. "My big brother... He's the one in charge."

"In charge? Huh? Y-You mean your brother is the leader of this revolution?"

Mia was starting to have second thoughts about following this girl.

"They talked him into it." She spat out the words like they were bile. "He got roped into this whole thing. It's not for him. He just talks up a storm when he's at the tavern. He can't lead a revolution."

Lynsha proceeded to tell her story. She and her older brother were born nobles, but their family fell on hard times. Her brother had been attending school at the royal capital, but familial decline forced him to move with them to a town in the countryside. At first he'd tried to make the best of the situation and start anew as a craftsman. However, the job proved demanding, and it didn't take long for him to begin complaining up a storm. Relentless physical labor left him drained day after day. Soon the tavern became his only reprieve, and he looked forward only to grumbling loudly over a mug of ale.

One day, he was approached by a man he didn't know.

"Hey, buddy. I've been listening to you, and I gotta say, you speak the damn truth. At this rate, this kingdom's headed straight for the gutter. What do you say we gather a few comrades and do something about it?"

The man introduced himself as "Jem" and, with sweet words and a disarming smile, pushed Lynsha's brother to take up a central role in the revolution. A naturally talented orator, her brother gradually built up an organization around his new purpose. As his sibling, Lynsha came to be seen as a member of the revolution as well, though she'd never made any formal commitment.

"I refuse to call that lot an 'organization.' It's just a gathering of whiners with too much time on their hands. It's that Jem guy who keeps stirring them up."

"Um... May I ask a question?" At this point, alarms were going off in Mia's head. "Why are you telling me so much about the internal workings of the revolution?"

An unnerving smile crept across Lynsha's face as she turned toward Mia.

"That Jem guy said you're a danger to the revolution and that we have to capture you at all costs. I figured the flip side of that is that you have the power to stop the revolution and break up this crazy gathering. Am I right?"

She gave Mia a searching gaze, who responded with a nervous chuckle.

"O-Ohoho, you greatly overestimate me. Wh-What can a child like me possibly do?"

"Really? You looked pretty calm when they were harassing you back there. Even now, you're still keeping your cool. That's not exactly how I'd expect a child to behave."

"Erm..."

She had a point. Compared to the revolutionary army in her alternate past — or heck, even the Sealence Forest incident from a bit ago — her current situation wasn't really scaring her much. Both the girl and the two boys from earlier looked at worst like a few school kids playing hooky. Unlike the soldiers of the last revolutionary army, they weren't pressing blades against her neck with bloodshot eyes full of hatred, nor did they exude the manic, murderous aura of Captain Dion. Honestly, these kids were downright cuddly in comparison.

Okay, come on. Keep it together, Mia. These are not your friends. You have to be cautious around them...

She exhaled slowly and put on what she thought was a very serious face. Then she began to think.

I wonder if I should assume this Jem person belongs to the same group as those people who attacked our wagon.

They were, after all, just about the only people who could possibly figure out where Mia had ended up after falling out of the wagon.

I think there's a real chance they know who I am.

Unless they knew she was the Princess of Tearmoon, they had no reason to target her. She'd be just some random girl otherwise. Granted, just because she was the Princess of Tearmoon didn't mean she had any way to stop this revolution...

Either way, it seems like a good idea to assume this man Jem knows who I am. Which means... Ugh... I'm getting some serious sugar cravings...

She promptly threw in the mental towel. The thinking she'd just done — however little it was — was nonetheless already causing her feeble mind to overheat.

I want some ice candies!

Just as her thoughts were beginning to veer drastically off course, an angry voice pulled her back to reality.

"Hey! Lynsha! You little cheat! Are you trying to take all the credit for yourself?!"

One of the two boys who had been guarding her had returned. Lynsha bit her lip.

"Don't be silly," she said, trying to put on a brave front. "Also, you sure came back early. Did you finish all the preparations?"

She glared at the boy, hoping her trembling voice didn't betray her. Her glare, however, soon turned into a frown, because the boy...

"W-Well, actually..."

...scratched his head and shuffled nervously in place. The next instant they heard, "Ah, so we've arrived. You're hereby dismissed," which was followed by a blunt sound of impact.

"Oof!"

The boy crumpled, revealing another boy behind him.

"Ah! Sion!"

"My apologies. Searching for you took longer than I would have

liked. I was lucky to find this fellow wandering about. I asked him very nicely to show me the way here."

The dashing figure of Sion Sol Sunkland gestured at his victim with the blade of his sword, his all-too-gracious smile suggesting that however he'd convinced the boy, it was probably not as nicely as he claimed.

Chapter 31: An Artificial Spark

"Are you hurt, Mia?"

"N-No, I'm quite fine."

Mia fidgeted as she replied, still a little embarrassed by how Sion was calling her by her given name.

"Excellent. Then could you perhaps introduce me to *das Fräulein* at your side?"

He cast a quick glance at Lynsha, his manner civil but his gaze hostile.

"Uh, I, um, this..."

Intimidated by his presence, she fumbled for words. Mia watched her, feeling a growing sense of pity for the girl as she wilted under Sion's silent pressure.

"Sion! Quit that! You're scary enough as is, so don't make it worse by glaring like that. Look at what you're doing to the poor girl," she said, stepping forward to shelter Lynsha behind her. "This is Lynsha. She's a member of the underground revolutionaries, but she helped me escape. She shared a lot of information with me too. She told me about how the leader of the revolutionaries is her older brother, and... well, lots of other things. Lots of very interesting things..."

Not that I know what any of it amounts to, of course, she tacked on mentally.

Now, the astute among you might have realized this already, but there's something worth pointing out here. Mia, you see, has simply recounted the events that occurred. That's it. She just told it like it is. No spin, no exaggeration. She just repeated it to him straight.

On Sion's side, however, this is what he heard: "In the time it took for you to find me, I already managed to pull someone with intimate knowledge of the revolutionaries onto our side." To his ears, it sounded like Mia was saying she'd extracted a wealth of valuable information.

And the Great Sage does it again. Her wisdom truly knows no

bounds.

He even started to wonder if Mia had knowingly let them kidnap her so she could learn more about them. His better judgment told him that couldn't be true, but some part of him felt like it wasn't entirely impossible... Alas, his trust in Mia now ran so deep that he was starting to entertain full blown conspiracy theories.

At the same time, he had to ask himself, *Had it been me, what would I have done?*

He looked at the unconscious boy at his feet, who didn't seem like a particularly daunting captor. Escape would likely have been a simple feat.

However, having the presence of mind to talk him into switching sides is probably beyond me.

She didn't just escape. She turned her capture into an opportunity to learn more about the enemy. The more he thought about it, the more impossible it seemed.

Heck, I doubt the thought would even cross my mind.

It goes without saying, of course, that the thought never crossed Mia's either. All she really did was show the boy some sass, and even that came back to bite her, so she accomplished basically nothing aside from humiliating herself. Anyway...

"May I assume that we're on the same side then?" asked Mia.

Lynsha nodded, but the gesture was guarded.

"If you'll work to stop the revolution, then I'll help you."

"Stop the revolution, huh..." Sion said. "The thing is, you'll probably have to speak to the King of Remno directly. Something has to be done about the heavy taxes."

He grimaced. To the best of his knowledge, the source of the people's frustration was the growing tax burden they had to endure. The problem was simple enough, but solving it was not going to be easy. Lynsha, however, shook her head.

"Not really. It's not lower taxes that my brother and his lot are demanding. It's the release of the chancellor, Lord Dasayev Donovan, who's being detained by the government."

That gave Sion pause.

"...What do you mean?"

"Lord Donovan spoke out against the tax hike, so His Majesty apparently jailed him to shut him up. My brother's group is fighting for his release."

“To reward principled remonstration with imprisonment... What folly.”

The conversation he’d had with Rafina before his departure resurfaced in his mind. She’d told him that “something happened.” Now, he finally knew what, and it was certainly reason enough for a revolt.

“Loyal is the subject who speaks the inconvenient truth. He had the courage to be honest with the king. Sadly, the king seems to have lacked the courage to listen and the wisdom to consider the consequences of harming someone who is speaking on behalf of the people...”

Mia noticed that Sion’s eyes twitched a little. She saw a hint of anger flash across them. The sight reminded her of a day in the previous timeline when Sion had come to see her in the dungeon. His words rang in her ears as clearly as when she’d first heard them.

“Outcount Rudolvon was giving out food to starving people — people that you and your family abandoned. He’s their savior. What did you think *would happen if you killed someone like that? It was so obvious, and yet...”* he’d said with a disparaging shake of his head. *“Don’t you people ever pause to consider the consequences of your actions?”*

At the time, Mia couldn’t say a thing back. The fact of the matter was that Outcount Rudolvon had been executed, and the grieving masses, furious over his death, had risen up in revolution. What Sion said was true, but... even so...

She’d bitten her lip, holding back a tide of grievances that threatened to spill forth. In that moment, what she’d wanted above all else was to lash out at him. To leap to her feet and scream in vehement defiance at his cocky, presumptuous face that what he’d said was total nonsense.

I just can’t see Father doing something like that.

Mia’s father, the Emperor of Tearmoon, wouldn’t put a subject to death because they were popular with the masses. He had no interest in such matters. In fact, had he been concerned with how he was perceived by his people, the empire likely wouldn’t have deteriorated so severely.

Something didn’t add up. It had stuck to her thoughts like slime, shapeless and invisible but terribly unpleasant. Nevertheless, faced with Sion’s withering criticism, she’d ultimately stayed silent, taking her doubts with her to the grave. Now she had a second

chance to voice those thoughts. She took all the frustration and indignation, the confusion and doubt, and rolled them into one short observation...

"You know, something just doesn't add—"

...Which was promptly drowned out by the frantic shouting of the unconscious boy's friend, who'd finally shown up.

"H-Hey! People! We have a serious... problem?"

He froze when he saw Mia, standing with her wrists unbound. Confused, his eyes then shifted to Sion, who cocked an eyebrow and gripped the hilt of his sword. The boy immediately squealed, turned on his heel, and began running off in the opposite direction. He barely managed three steps before Sion bashed him over the head. There was a sharp *shiiink*, and the next thing he knew, he was on the ground staring down the length of Sion's unsheathed blade. Its honed edge glinted menacingly, and he squealed again.

I sort of feel sorry for him... thought Mia as she watched, the pitiful sight of the boy cowering in terror overlapping with her own past experiences. *Oh, wait a minute! This is the punk kid who told me to jump for him! Hmph! Good riddance!*

She quickly switched from sympathizing with him to relishing his suffering. Mia was not one to dwell. It was one of her strong points.

Grinning from ear to ear, she sat down and watched as the boy was made to sit humbly on his legs in submission. Lynsha walked over and kneeled down in front of him.

"What's the matter? You said there was a serious problem. What is it?"

"Lynsha! What's going on? Why are—"

"Later. Just answer me first."

"O-Okay... So, our comrades kicked things off already. They occupied the local guard station and seized all the weapons. Now they're on their way to the mayor's house."

"What? Weren't things supposed to start tomorrow? Why'd they... Did that Jem guy tell them to?"

"No, it was your brother. He made the call himself. He said we have comrades in a standoff against the army, and we can't afford to keep them waiting any longer. So to help them he went to the town square to gather support for a raid on the guard station."

"Ugh, that's him all right..." Lynsha pressed a palm to her face and let out a short, frustrated breath. "And? How bad was it?"

“Wasn’t much of a battle, apparently. There were about a dozen guards at the station, but your brother brought a couple hundred people bearing down on them from the town square. The guard captain freaked out and bolted. I gotta say though, your brother? He’s really something.”

“Yeah, him and his silver tongue... He’s a genius when it comes to persuasion. If he were king, I bet people would line up to pay him taxes.”

Lynsha sighed again before turning to Mia and Sion. “Well, you heard him. To the mayor’s house, then. Let’s go.”

Huh?

Mia looked at Lynsha like the girl was daft. What did she mean, “let’s go?”

Ohoho, what a silly girl, just assuming we’re going to follow her. As if I’m going to go anywhere near such a dangerous place...

“That does sound rather dangerous...” came Sion’s voice in agreement.

See? Even Sion thinks—

She glanced in his direction to find the most “let’s do this” smile she’d ever seen. The bottom dropped out of her stomach.

“But if you absolutely insist, then I shall accompany you,” he said with a firm voice and an even firmer grip on his sword.

“Erm, uh, but...”

She stammered. Before she even had a chance to protest with something to the effect of “Hold your damn horses!” Sion’s expression had already changed into a puzzled frown.

“Hm? Did I misjudge something? Let’s see... Ah, of course...” he said in a low mumble before nodding, evidently having answered his own question. “Don’t worry about the others. I know I said I want to meet up with them as soon as possible, but we’re staring down the gullet of this army, and I’m not about to pass up an opportunity to probe the belly of the beast. It’d be a waste of your efforts otherwise.”

“M-My efforts? Well, actually, I—”

“Less talking, more walking. Come on, let’s go,” urged Lynsha.

Mia, who’d been in obedient-captive mode for a little too long, reflexively rose to her feet. A few seconds later, the implications of her situation fully dawned on her.

Wait a minute... I’m not allowed to say “no” anymore, am I?

They were past the point where the outcome could be swayed

by anything she said. She immediately shifted gears.

Well, as long as Sion is here, he'll probably protect me. Plus, we've got the sister of the revolutionary army's leader with us. Hm, now that I think about it, maybe it's not that dangerous after all.

Mia was, after all, not one to dwell. It was one of her strong points. And she was still curious. Something definitely didn't add up, and she wanted to know why.

"By the way, I've been wondering, who exactly is this Jem fellow?" asked Sion casually as they walked.

"He's one of our comrades. My brother said he met him at the tavern."

"Was he the one who told you to kidnap Mia?"

"Yeah. He said she'd be an obstacle to the revolution."

"He must be from the same crew as those who attacked our wagon then... But those two boys..."

Sion thought back on his encounter with the pair of young kidnappers. Both of them had been such pushovers that they couldn't possibly have been trained to fight.

They're a far cry from the wagon assailants...

His ruminating was interrupted by an abrupt change in scenery as the alley gave way to a wharf, where a number of small boats were moored. The view widened into a vast expanse of waterways. There was the energy of a busy marketplace in the air.

"Ah, it hadn't occurred to me until just now, but the river we fell into runs close to here, doesn't it?" noted Mia.

"Looks like it. Which makes this place a traffic hub..." answered Sion before nodding to himself. "I see. Tell me, was it that Jem fellow who chose this town as the stage for this revolt?"

Lynsha gave him a puzzled look. Before she could respond, he continued.

"If so, then he knows what he's doing. He's picking his targets carefully, and it's no coincidence that he struck here first. This kind of calculated maneuvering also happens to match the way our wagon assailants operated."

Chapter 32: Lambert, Frontman and Firebrand

The trio made their way toward the mayor's manor, trying their best to keep a low profile in the process. Figuring it was best to disguise themselves, Sion donned a hat while Mia wrapped a cloth around her head and tied it under her nose. Sion, for his part, wore his new apparel well, but the same could not be said for Mia. On account of being rather nervous, her hands couldn't stop fidgeting and her eyes kept darting all over the place. If anything, her disguise made her more suspicious. The town happened to be preoccupied, however, and no one paid much attention to them.

Armed youths lined the streets. Their attire and armaments — a mishmash of all sorts of things — lacked the uniformity of a true army, but they all wore the same bright-eyed expression of excitement.

"The revolutionary army..."

At first, the sight evoked past memories, but she quickly noticed the difference between the army she remembered and the one she saw now. The eyes of these people glowed with the innocent enthusiasm of those attending a festival. They were not mired in the kind of hatred and menace that oozed outward, wrapping around her like invisible, bloodthirsty tendrils. These were not the empire's revolutionaries.

Roadside houses all had shuttered doors and windows, presumably an attempt to avoid getting mixed up in the ruckus, but there were no signs of robbery or ransacking. Though there was plenty of commotion, there wasn't any violence.

Which more or less matches our experience so far. That pair of kids were jerks, but I can't really see them killing anyone.

"Look over there. Those are our revolutionary comrades."

Lynsha pointed at a gathering of people. Those leaving the gathering held in their hands a strip of blue cloth.

"What are those?"

“They’re a symbol of the revolution. Apparently, they’re supposed to tie that around their heads. I think they call themselves the ‘Blue Scarves’ or something.”

“The… Blue Scarves?” repeated Mia.

Hm, what an odd name. It almost sounds plagiarized. And for some reason, it makes me think of some weird cult with a creepy leader.

For a short moment, Mia’s instincts spiked to peak performance, catching information that flowed from literally another dimension! The only problem was that this piece of hard-earned knowledge was entirely irrelevant to everyone in her world. Too bad for her.

The Diamond Legion sounds so much stronger.

“By the way,” said Sion, “how much do these people know about us?”

“The more senior members have probably been informed, but I’m not sure about those people. It looks like they’re just showing up after answering my brother’s call.”

“I see. Perfect. Let’s blend in with them and hasten our pace.”

Sion jogged over to the crowd and returned with a blue cloth.

“Here, Mia. You should put one on too.”

“A-Are you sure about this?” she asked as she wrapped the blue cloth around her head like a bandana.

Once she was done, Lynsha looked her over and sighed.

“Well… I guess it’s better than the one you were draping over your head.”

The mayor’s manor had an almost lavish air that resembled the dwellings of nobility. By the time they arrived, the commotion was already beginning to calm, and the large yard was steadily filling with blue bandana-ed men. Soon, a voice was heard above the din, speaking in a fashion that was meant to rile up their emotions. The voice came from a young man with brown hair who shared Lynsha’s deep blue eyes, though his seemed almost glazed with euphoric zeal.

“The demand we make is nothing if not justified. Heavy taxes have caused us much hardship. We wish to speak. To have our suffering be heard. Old Dasayev is the one who gave us a voice, and we want him returned. That is all. However, the king and his government have turned a deaf ear to us. Does that sound reasonable to you? Should they be allowed to treat us with such contempt? No! And that is why we are rising up! The mayor had

already fled with the guards before we surrounded the manor, ignoring our pleas and abandoning the very responsibility of governance."

His voice did not possess the velvet texture of a singer's, nor did it resonate with power as a guard captain's might. It had a very particular ebb and flow that imbued it with a charisma most often seen in politicians seeking to energize, or perhaps instigate, the masses to action.

"It is very unfortunate that we could not prevent the mayor's escape, but in return, we have gained control over the town without losing a single man. This is all thanks to you, my comrades. None of this would have been possible if you hadn't answered our call and lent us your strength. For that you have my deepest gratitude."

Roars of approval rose throughout the listening crowd of youths. Despite the fact that they hadn't even fought a battle, nevermind emerged victorious, their morale was extremely high.

"Ah... A compelling speaker," Sion commented. "More firebrand than frontman perhaps, with the way he stirs up emotions, but he plays both parts well. Is that your brother, Lynsha?"

His question was answered not by Lynsha but the speaker himself who looked in their direction.

"Hey, Lynsha. I didn't know you were coming."

"Lambert..." Lynsha murmured, meeting his gaze.

"Oh? I see you brought some kids with you. Who are they?" her brother asked as he glanced quizzically at her companions. "Might they be the kids Jem was talking about? The ones who are supposed to be a danger to the revolution?"

At his words, the whole crowd of people reached for their swords. Sion was about to respond in kind, but Lambert held up a hand to pacify his audience.

"Peace! We must show restraint, comrades, lest we debase the integrity of our voices, for who would lend an ear to the words of those who draw their swords on children?"

"I brought them here so you can hear what they have to say. Please, Lambert..." Lynsha implored. "Talk to them."

"Talk, you say?"

He gave Sion and Mia a scrutinizing look before the corners of his lips turned up in a faint smile.

Chapter 33: Mia and Sion… Reach the Same Conclusion!

“Let’s not stand around out here. What say we head inside for this talk?”

Mia’s trio followed Lambert into the manor.

“Come in, come in,” he bade. “Welcome to… well, not exactly my *humble* home, but you get the idea.”

He spoke with an air of nonchalance as he strolled with the elegant stride of a noble through the main hall.

“Let’s see… I believe the office was down this way…”

He pushed open an elaborate door and led them into a stately room that definitely looked the part of a powerful person’s office. A chandelier hung from the ceiling. It was of simple design, but it was still, you know, a *chandelier*. Well-cleaned and transparent, its crystalline radiance dazzled.

“Hah. What nerve,” Lambert said, gesturing obliquely at the expensive fixture before striding brazenly toward the office’s desk. “They swipe all those taxes from us, and this is what they spend it on?”

He plopped into the mayor’s chair and leaned against the backrest.

“Hm. Expensive-looking,” he remarked with pursed lips, “but not particularly comfortable.”

“Lambert! Enough already! What’s the point of all this?! What’ll it accomplish?!”

“Shut it, Lynsha. This is politics, and you’re a woman. I have no intention of talking about the former with the latter. It’s a waste of time.”

He leaned back farther into his chair so that he was looking down his nose at her.

That reminds me. Remno has a pervasive culture of male chauvinism, doesn’t it?

Mia’s opinion of Lambert immediately took a nosedive. Well, as

much of a nosedive as it could manage, considering it hadn't been very high to begin with.

"What interests me far more... is these two." Lambert looked from Mia to Sion before his smile turned cordial. "But, ah, I seem to have forgotten my manners. Where are the tea and sweets, you must be wondering. Take a seat first, and I'll have them brought to us."

My, tea and sweets! This man knows how to welcome a guest!

Mia's opinion of Lambert swung back upward. It was only a small recovery, but it put him above the likes of Prince... whatever Abel's brother's name was. He was still below the Diamond Legionnaires though; Mia was a lover of large men, and he didn't fall under that category.

"I appreciate the cordiality, but I do believe we're all on a bit of a clock, so I think we should get straight to the point."

Sion ignored the guest couch and remained standing, never taking his eyes off Lambert. There wasn't a hint of laxity in his wary gaze. As for Mia, she was already comfortably embedded in the couch cushions. She'd even shifted her bottom around a little to find the comfiest spot possible to lean back and sink into their soft embrace. Like Sion, there wasn't a hint of laxity in her wary gaze. Except hers was directed at the door, awaiting the arrival of tea and sweets with predatory focus.

"Well, color me intimidated, Your Highness. It seems that the rumors are true; Sion Sol Sunkland can indeed strike fear into the hearts of his opponents with a single look."

Lambert clapped his hands in joking applause as he quipped. Lynsha's eyes widened at this comment, but the prince in question was unmoved.

"Still, I have to say," he continued, "for the prince of a kingdom to march unguarded into a place like this... You certainly live up to your name, Your Recklessly Bold Highness."

"You knew, then."

"Of course I did. I wouldn't have let you keep your sword otherwise," he said, still lounging in his chair.

"I see. I'd assumed you took us for mere children and deemed us harmless." Sion pointedly rested his hand on the hilt of his sword and narrowed his eyes at Lambert. "So? What's the deal here? Why did you welcome a pair of ostensible enemies, and even let us keep our weapons? Aren't we a danger to the revolution? What do you

gain from this?"

"I have my reasons. To be perfectly honest with you, O Crown Prince of Sunkland, I was counting on your kingdom's help. After all, this," he gestured in the direction of the crowd outside, "is a tad insufficient for our purposes."

"What you are requesting is military intervention. I'll kindly remind you that mobilizing an army is not as simple as rallying a rabble."

"Huh. I'll be damned. Now isn't that the oddest thing to hear from the lips of His Highness Sion Sol Sunkland, upholder of justice and champion of all that is right and fair? Do you feel nothing after witnessing the state of this kingdom? A sensible politician who cares about the people is thrown in jail and heavy taxes are imposed while a tyrant of a monarch runs amok, and you're going to turn a blind eye?"

Sion hadn't actually seen the people's destitution for himself. However, if the King had indeed thrown a loyal subject in jail for having the courage to speak out against flawed policy, then it was true that he couldn't simply stand by and watch.

"All right. Suppose, then, that Sunkland promises you its support. I nonetheless fail to see how you can ensure your survival until help arrives."

That brought a smile to Lambert's lips. He tapped his head with his finger.

"Think about where we are. This place is halfway between the capital and Donovan County. Which means..."

Sion's eyes narrowed.

"...You're going after their logistics operations, aren't you? You plan to cut off the Diamond Legion's supply line and isolate them from the capital," he said as he folded his arms thoughtfully.

They were, of course, still within Remno's borders, so even if their supply station was raided they could receive provisions from elsewhere in the country. However, rerouting the logistics would take time, and the resulting confusion would surely impact the soldiers' morale. If the revolutionaries had led a revolt in this town with the specific intention of leveraging its geographic utility in this fashion...

I was under the impression that they were a disorganized rabble. Was I wrong? An alarm went off in his head. *Frontman and firebrand, huh... I can't say for certain just yet, but he seems like a man who*

knows what he's doing. It would be unwise to underestimate him.

In his mind, he cranked the caution level for Lambert up a notch.

Meanwhile, what was going on in Mia's...

My! Cookies! With cute little designs on them to boot!

...Was mentally applauding the arrival of her long-awaited sweets. She popped one into her mouth before anyone had the chance to utter a word and immediately held her cheeks in sensuous delight as it melted into pure, sugary goodness on her tongue. Only after thoroughly savoring it did she turn to the man who'd brought her the cookies.

This man... knows what he's doing. I'd better not underestimate him.

Weirdly enough, the two of them reached the same conclusion.

"So, what do you think, Prince Sion? Are my words folly or insight?" asked Lambert, grinning smugly as he laid out a map of Remno on the desk. "Personally, I believe they're the latter."

The Remno capital lay in the kingdom's northern region. When looking at the map, the town of Senia was on the bottom left, where Mia and company currently resided. A fat line could be seen beside the town, marking a major road through the center of the kingdom that led to Donovan County in the south.

"So this is the supply route you plan to cut off," murmured Sion as he traced his finger along the line. "If this road is blocked off, is there another way to get through?"

"There is, but it won't be easy. Chances are, it'll take them a while to prepare."

Remno had one thing it should be proud of... and it wasn't its powerful army. It was actually the wide network of roads that spanned its kingdom.

What did Keithwood say again? If memory serves... That the true strength of Remno lies in its highways connecting noble domains to one another, which provides the basis for the extreme mobility of the army's rapid response force.

Even infantry, which normally had limited mobility, could be loaded onto wagons and transported at great speed, significantly expanding Remno's strategic and tactical options. Furthermore, the highways ensured supply lines could be maintained smoothly and efficiently. These qualities freed up its elite unit — the central rapid

response force — to be deployed with concentrated precision. Having perfected their defensive system, if they were to then expand a little more — to continue enhancing its capabilities — then the vector of their attention could turn from inward to out, and their military apparatus would change from an aegis of order to a weapon for invasion.

So that's what this round of heavy taxes is for.

Seeing that Sion was deep in thought, Lambert gave him another little push.

"You know, talk of method and tactics is all well and good, but isn't there something more important? You're surely aware, Prince Sion, that the government of this kingdom has sent the Diamond Legion — an excessively powerful military force — to suppress its own people. Does that alone not disqualify them from serving as our leaders? We're just lucky that fighting has yet to commence, but once it does..."

Sion pressed his lips together. The implications were dire, and that alone justified the criticism being leveled against the government. A unilateral massacre was about to take place, and he'd be damned if he was going to stand by and let it happen.

The situation is doubtlessly complicated... but the fact is that they burdened their people with heavy taxes, then imprisoned their own chancellor for daring to speak on the people's behalf. Is that alone not egregious enough an act to pronounce them unfit to rule? I wasn't expecting much from this trip other than to provide Mia with some company, but... Should I actually be counting my blessings? If I didn't come, I wouldn't have learned about the reality on the ground here, and I wouldn't have personally gotten to know these revolutionaries. Maybe this is a chance to—

A clink of ceramic jerked Sion out of his thought spiral. His head snapped toward the direction of the sound, where Mia had just set her teacup down on its plate. She leaned her head back and, her eyes closed in a look of pure pleasure, let out a deep, satisfied sigh, presumably at the flavor of the tea she'd just sipped. The smile she wore formed gentle dimples on her cheeks, which were accentuated by the glow of a faint blush. There was an air of nonchalance to her that was conspicuous and... almost deliberate. And immediately, it hit him.

Scorching sun... He almost got me.

The haze of heat in his mind dissipated, and cold clarity set in.

He looked at the man before him.

Frontman and firebrand, huh. I see he's particularly talented at the latter.

Lambert was a compelling speaker and a force to be reckoned with. He employed words with the skill of a conman, imbuing them with a charm that wormed its way into one's heart.

"What I want," said the firebrand, "is to change this kingdom... into one where injustice no longer reigns."

"By the way..." Sion interjected. Figuring it wasn't wise to keep listening to a swindler speak, he changed the topic. "Weren't we supposed to be obstacles to the revolution? I heard from some of your friends that a fellow who goes by the name of Jem had mentioned something to that effect."

"Ah, right. That reminds me..." Lambert grinned and looked at Mia. "I've been meaning to do something about that as well, Your Highness Mia Luna Tearmoon."

"Eh?"

She gave him a deer in the headlights look.

"It is morally imperative that our resistance movement succeeds, and I'd like for you people to avoid doing anything that would prevent that."

As Lambert continued to orate, Jem's words echoed in his mind. The man had informed him that the Prince of Sunkland and the Princess of Tearmoon were going to secretly enter the kingdom. Prince Sion should be converted into an ally, but Princess Mia was a potential threat to the revolution. Therefore, she needed to be eliminated in a manner that wouldn't seem too suspicious to Sion.

But thanks to my stupid sister, that's never going to happen now.

If he pushed ahead and tried to harm Princess Mia in plain sight, it would ruin any chance he had of getting Sion to help. That meant he had to fall back on the next best plan.

I need Princess Mia to either join our side or at least keep her mouth shut.

Fortunately, he was dealing with a little girl. He'd heard all the rumors, but at the end of the day, she was just a little kid. A little *girl.*

It can't be that hard to talk her into helping us.

With that thought in mind, he turned to her with a grin.

"In any case, I'm sure you're very tired from all the traveling

today. If you'd like, you can feel free to stay the night in this manor. It's certainly no palace, but you'll at least enjoy a large bath and bed."

"My! A bath?!"

Seeing that Mia's eyes had doubled in size at the mention of a bath, Lambert knew he had this in the bag.

The Princess of Tearmoon is a bath fan, huh. It looks like the rumors were right on.

It seemed to him that it shouldn't be long before he had her in the palm of his hand. Feeling certain of his victory, he began planning what he should do afterward. This kind of behavior had a name: counting one's chickens before they'd hatched.

Chapter 34: Princess Mia… Gets More Blood Flowing to Her Head

"Look, Mia, I know you have your ways, but wasn't that a little careless?"

"Careless? Whatever do you mean?"

Sion's sigh came from beyond the door to Mia's room.

"I know he's unlikely to harm you as long as he's counting on military aid from Sunkland, but…"

If Lambert tried to harm Mia, it would be an immediate deal-breaker for Sion. Furthermore, it would undoubtedly make an enemy of the whole Tearmoon Empire. Therefore, the chances of Lambert turning on them were very low. Moreover, if they left the manor and roamed around outside, they ran the risk of running into the man called Jem. If he wasn't aware of Lambert's plans, he could very well make an attempt on Mia's life. It was safer for them to stay here with Lambert, who was at least willing to peacefully divulge *some* information.

"Still, spending the night here is—"

This sentence was interrupted by the sound of splashing water. Mia, you see, was currently in the midst of enjoying a nice, hot bath like the debaucherous aristocrat she was. Sion had chosen to stand guard outside her door in case of emergency, but the constant sloshing from inside the room assaulted his ears and mind, leaving him restless and a little stressed out. In an attempt to distract himself, he kept trying to make small talk, but his uneasiness caused it to come out more like idle grievance than friendly banter.

My! How terribly adorable!

Mia, in a rare display of perceptiveness, accurately discerned Sion's flustered state, and she seized upon the opportunity to entertain herself at his expense. With a downright devilish grin, she purposefully fluttered about in the bath, knowing full well that the sound of her conspicuous splashing would torment her anxious

guard outside. The thought that Prince Perfect was now at her mercy filled her with an intoxicating sense of superiority that she simply couldn't contain. Her behavior escalated more and more as she sloshed around nonstop, ensuring he wouldn't have a moment of peace. At one point, she even lifted a leg out of the water and struck a seductive pose. Not that he could see her, of course, but it's the thought that counts. In her mind, she was now the Great Seductress of the Empire.

Mmhmhm... Face my revenge, Sion!

Meanwhile, Lynsha stood beside her, waiting, with a look of profound exasperation, for the pint-sized succubus to stop it with the bathtub acrobatics. She'd been told to wait inside just in case something happened, but did it really make sense to have her do this? While she was busy pondering the necessity of her job assignment, Mia picked up a bottle of shampoo and poured some into her palm. She rubbed it between her hands and promptly frowned.

"Now that's odd. For a Remno shampoo, it doesn't produce a very good lather... I suppose this means the one I received from Prince Abel must be specially made..."

"Receiving presents from a prince? Wow... you really are a princess, aren't you? Out of curiosity, what kind of shampoo was it?" asked Lynsha.

"It had an adorable drawing of a horse on it. I don't remember what it was called though..."

"Uh... Huh. Isn't that—"

"It was such a wonderful shampoo. When I meet Abel, I'll have to tell him I owe him a big thank you."

The sight of Mia's innocent smile convinced Lynsha to leave her sentence unfinished. Ignorance, she decided, was probably worth this particular bliss.

"Ah, right. You, uh, sure do, I guess?"

"Mmhmhm, don't worry, Lynsha. I'm sure you'll find a nice young man for yourself someday as well," said Mia, incredibly full of herself at the moment.

The smugness was honestly a little grating, but Lynsha, in a display of profound maturity, resisted the urge to snap at the cheeky little aristocrat. Someone, after all, had to be the adult in the room.

Ahh, I must say, thought Mia, *taking a bath like this makes me*

miss Anne.

Normally, Anne would be giving her back a nice, gentle scrub. Under the current circumstances, though... Well, she couldn't exactly ask Lynsha to fill in.

"By the way, you're still going to stop my brother, right?"

"...Uh, well, you know what they say. Haste makes waste, right? And it'd be a terrible shame if this wonderfully hot bath went cold, so let's just enjoy this for now."

Mia dodged the question, but it made her ponder her next step. The combined effect of nourishment through the oral intake of sweets and bath-mediated improvement in circulation was sending glucose-rich blood to her head, and her brain was regaining its function. She was on top of the world, which, to be clear, was definitely a description of her perception of reality and not her actual place in it.

After the bath, having rid herself of many days' worth of sweat and grime, she was back up to maybe eighty percent of her usual beauty. Unfortunately, her cleanliness did not translate into competence, and ultimately, no good ideas materialized.

Faint wisps of warm vapor were still rising from Mia's head as she walked out of the bathroom. The bathrobe prepared for her was a tad large, but the comfort afforded by the extra space was perfect for her flushed body.

"Phew. I feel refreshed... Hm? What's the matter?" she asked, tilting her head innocently at Sion, who looked like he'd just fought a war and barely made it back to tell the tale.

He let out a bone-weary sigh and shook his head.

"I'm honestly dying to know what kind of plans you're cooking up in that head of yours... but regardless, we should still meet up with Keithwood and Tiona. Knowing them, they've probably made contact with the Wind Crows already and are searching for us as we speak. Also, I need to get word back to Sunkland..."

He spoke with urgency, but he figured they still had a few days to work with before anything significant happened.

He was wrong.

The next day, a scouting party returned with a report. Knights bearing the King's mark had already taken up position along the roads, and leading them was...

Chapter 35: Black Crows and White Crows

Monica Buendia.

That was the name of the maid who'd assassinated Prince Abel in the previous timeline. As the prince had had a reputation for being an extraordinary playboy, many figured it was a crime of passion, but the details of the incident were never made clear and would ultimately be lost to history.

Let us swim back up the time stream to the day after Mia had fallen into the river.

Monica walked down a hallway in the royal castle of Remno. Eventually, she stopped in front of a government official's office and rapped on the door with a particular rhythm. A few seconds later, the door swung open soundlessly.

"Master Graham."

"Ah, it's you, Monica..."

The man gestured for her to come inside, making no attempt to hide his dark mood. Monica had always thought he had a crabby sort of face, but today it was even crabbier than usual.

"Freaking Diamond Legion..." muttered Graham. "What the hell is the matter with them? Why haven't they done anything yet? That blasted Great Sage... Don't tell me this is her doing again..."

He spoke with the paranoid tone of a full-blown conspiracy nut. After grumbling to himself for a little longer, he finally looked up at Monica.

"And? What do you want?"

"I received this this morning."

She held out her hand to reveal a small piece of folded papyrus.

Graham yanked it out of her hand with a scowl and opened it up.

"Princess Mia and Prince Sion... Augh, damn it, they're..."

He grimaced after reading it and huffed out a frustrated breath

before handing Monica another piece of papyrus.

"Send this back home."

"Right away."

She took it and began parsing its contents. Her job was to take encrypted messages and transcribe them into code for messenger birds. However, after she finished reading Graham's letter, she frowned.

"Excuse me, but are you sure this is right?"

"What do you mean?"

"This is false information that will drag our homeland into a war. Is it really all right for me to send this?"

"Hmph. What a fitting concern for you Black Crows. Keep roaming the shadows like the snoops you are, content to simply observe. Unlike you, however, I am a White Crow, and I must act. Whereas your job ends with information, mine starts with it. I must use it — weaponize it — for the glory of our homeland. Information warfare is our raison d'etre, and we White Crows are the vanguard."

Monica kept her eyes on the letter but bit hard into her lip.

The Wind Crows was the intelligence unit of the Kingdom of Sunkland. Established many generations ago by a past king, its primary mission was to send undercover agents into surrounding nations and ensure information flowed back to the homeland. The intelligence they provided was vital in informing Sunkland's diplomatic and military decisions. Throughout most of its history it had operated in secret, collecting information and reporting back. It could, therefore, be argued that the Wind Crows was a passive organization.

Change came in the form of a man named Jem, who advocated for a more aggressive approach to intelligence that would lay the groundwork for an expansionist project. No longer would they simply bring back the information. They would make active use of it to weaken other kingdoms, sow discord among their people, and expand Sunkland's borders under the name of justice. In order to carry out this project, a special team was formed within the Wind Crows and given the name "White Crows." They were the ivory messengers that would herald the righteous glory of Sunkland throughout the continent.

"I trust you understand that the work of us White Crows is of the utmost importance. Our mission is to be prioritized above all else."

"...Yes, I understand." Monica nodded, but it didn't make the acknowledgment any easier to swallow.

After leaving Graham's office, Monica let out a soft sigh.

What am I even doing...

She was a Sunkland native, and she felt a great deal of pride in her motherland. The stalwart dedication of its royalty to justice and fairness, and the constant vigilance of its government against fraud and corruption made her glad to call the kingdom home. To her, Sunkland was a beacon of glory and virtue.

And yet, the things that we're doing... These deeds... Aren't they stains on Sunkland's good name?

Tendrils of doubt began to envelop her heart, and her breath quickened. Just as the panic was about to set in, someone rammed into her, sending both her and her documents flying. She landed hard on her knees and realized with shock that the critical piece of papyrus was lying on the ground in plain sight. The content was encrypted, but it was still unwise to expose it to uncertified eyes. She rushed to recover it, but just as she reached her hand toward the page, a boot came down on it with a thud.

"Ah—"

She looked up to find a set of teeth set in a leering smile. It belonged to a middle-aged official.

"Move, woman. Don't just sit there. You're in the way," the man said disdainfully.

Monica's mission was to gather information as a royal maid. In Remno, women were looked down on, and the lips of senior officials could be shockingly loose around them. Presumably, they assumed women simply didn't have the capacity to grasp the significance of anything they heard. Therefore, this disdain... this *demeaning contempt* she suffered was ultimately to her advantage. She should be glad to be treated this way.

Alas, the mind can't hide from what the heart does know. To suffer in the line of duty... was still to suffer. Every such encounter chipped away at her soul. More and more, she found herself assaulted by waves of bitter disgust whenever she witnessed her fellow maids being subjected to denigration by men. At times, she could barely keep herself from retching.

This wretched kingdom... maybe it is *justice for it to get wiped out.*

Even if a river of blood had to be spilt, wouldn't it be worth it

to trade this deep injustice for a more righteous future under Sunkland's rule? The thought creeped out of the darkest part of her heart and invaded her mind. Just as it was about to take root, however, a boy's voice rang in her ear.

"Pick. Those. Up."

A trace of youthful soprano yet lingered in its timbre, but its steady tone bespoke an unfaltering will. She spun around.

"Did I not make myself clear? I said pick those up. And apologize to her," commanded Abel Remno, Second Prince of the kingdom that bore his name.

Chapter 36: Verdurous Are the Weeds of Hope

"Ah, Y-Your Highness, this is..." The middle-aged official took a few panicked steps back. "Uh, that woman, you see... she wasn't watching where she—"

"I'll say it one last time. *Pick those up*," Abel growled before taking a step forward. "Or should I take this to mean that the words of the emasculate Second Prince are not worthy of your ears?"

"N-No, of course not."

The official hastily picked up the scattered documents and held them out at Monica. He impatiently shook them a few times, and when she took them, he gave her a resentful glare. It did not escape Abel's notice.

"Also," the prince added, "let it be known that should I witness any further disrespect toward her, then I shall consider it to be a slight upon my own honor."

He glared pointedly at the official, his narrowed eyes exuding the same menacing air as a sword drawn on the battlefield. It was a look that could kill.

Oh how the prince has grown... I never thought I'd see a look like that on him.

Something stirred in Monica as she regarded the expression on Abel's face, and for a moment, she retreated into her thoughts. Ever since coming here, her impression of the young Second Prince hadn't been all that bad. Despite the prevailing notions in this kingdom, he'd always treated her well. It wasn't just her either. He was considerate toward not only his mother and sisters, but the maids who served him as well. It showed, she thought, that the boy had a kind heart. She'd come to see him almost as a younger brother and, as the days went on, he'd often brought a fond smile to her face.

However, it would be remiss of her to deny that she also deemed him ill-suited to rule. Indecisive and lacking in discipline,

his personality left her no choice but to assume that he'd struggle to make the hard decisions so often required of those who wielded power. Until now, that is...

In a situation like this, the Abel I used to know would have put on that flippant smile of his and smoothed things over with a laugh. He probably would have helped me, but he definitely wouldn't have reprimanded anyone. And yet... He's changed.

Now, she saw in Abel a hint of the prince from her homeland, Sion. So profound was the change that she began to feel a glimmer of hope. Perhaps he was the one who could free Remno from the shackles of its brutal misogyny. At the same time, she couldn't help but wonder what it was that had brought about this transformation in him.

"Are you all right?"

Abel's voice brought her out of her thoughts, and she looked up to find him peering down at her.

"Ah, my apologies, Your Highness."

"The apologies are all mine. I realize that it must be terribly difficult for all of you to work here. I'm aware of the need for change, but time and again, I discover that change does not come easily."

He smiled wryly and ran his hand through his hair.

"Um, at the risk of sounding rude, may I ask what it was that changed you so?"

"Hm? I've changed? Really?"

"Yes. You've grown... hardier, and more mature."

"Ahaha, maybe you're right. I guess it's because I can't afford to be making a fool of myself in front of her..."

Her...

Monica was intimately familiar with the person to whom he referred. She was, of course, Mia Luna Tearmoon, Princess of Tearmoon, Great Sage of the Empire, and the absolute bane of Graham's existence — the girl who took Abel's kindness... and gave it *teeth*. Gone was the cub who was tender but lacking, he'd been replaced by a young lion endowed with claw and mane. Just who was this mystical character she knew only from rumor and hearsay? Suddenly, she discovered within herself a burgeoning curiosity about the Great Sage of the Empire.

"What kind of person is this Princess Mia?"

"Hmm, good question..."

Abel silently mulled this over for a while. Then he looked up, causing Monica to follow his gaze, before answering with an embarrassed smile, “She’s... like the moon. Breathtaking, but far beyond my reach. Her magnificence is such that I’ll never be her match, yet she believes with all her heart that one day, I will. That’s the kind of person she is... Someone who has faith in me and encourages me to go further. To do better.”

His words were reverent, his tone tender and heartfelt. Then, his voice changed.

“That’s why... I need to live up to that faith. I have to be better. I *need to*. But...”

As he trailed off, Monica looked at him closer. She discovered that his face was taut... And it suddenly occurred to her that he was wearing armor.

“Your Highness? You can’t be...”

“Hm? Ah. Yes, I am. Things are apparently at a deadlock on the frontlines. Morale is probably slipping, so I’ve been told to head out there and give it a boost. To be honest, my brother is better suited to the task, but *somebody* had to go and slam a piece of metal down on his shoulder, so now I’m up.” He shrugged. “You reap what you sow, I guess. Can’t complain. Also, as a member of the royal family, I need to do my duty, lest the monarchy collapse and chaos engulfs the land...”

He straightened his back a little, but his expression didn’t brighten.

“Is there something that worries you?” she asked.

“Hm? Oh, no, not really... It’s just that...” His gaze grew distant, and he suddenly looked very lonely. “I don’t think she’ll ever forgive me for taking part in the suppression of my own people.”

“Your Highness...”

“I’m off, then.”

After watching Abel depart with his escort, Monica went to her messenger birds. She released one — a white crow — carrying the message for her homeland. Then she released another one, sending with it the truth. A black crow took to the skies. There was no guarantee that her ebony messenger would find its way to the intended recipient. But even so...

If it does, then that means... fate willed it so, right?

She watched it go, its dark form fading into the distance,

fluttering in the wind, as it made its way toward its secret destination.

Thus, the seeds that an unwitting Mia had so diligently sowed began to sprout. Like weeds, they spread from place to place, verdurous and filled with hope.

Chapter 37: Princess Mia... Declares Her Resolve

In a particularly large and luxurious guest room in the mayor's manor, a pint-sized princess was currently indulging in a rather excessive amount of shut-eye. The room was furnished with a bed so big that even Mia — a bit of a kicker in her sleep — didn't have to worry about falling off. As soon as she'd had the chance, she'd rolled herself up in a soft, down-filled comforter and surrendered herself to its tender embrace.

You can't really blame her.

It had, after all, been a while since she'd slept in a bed. Furthermore, the plan was to leave the next day to meet up with Keithwood and Tiona, and the thought of abandoning her newfound nest was having a negative impact on her motivation to get up. Sion, worried about being attacked at night, didn't actually get much sleep, but such concerns were beneath Mia. They were so far beneath her that she never even considered the possibility. As it turns out, ignorance isn't just bliss; it's also a great sedative. So she managed to sleep soundly, mumbling something about delicious mushroom stew while making slurping noises. Her lips curled up into a gluttonous grin as she continued to gorge herself in her dreams. Sadly, her scrumptious fantasy was shattered by a noise coming from the hallway.

"Mmm?" She woke up with a yawn. "How terribly loud... What is the matter?"

She dangled her legs over the side of the bed and rubbed her eyes. Once the heavy haze of sleep had cleared from her mind, she stood up, feeling the soft sensation of thick carpet under her bare feet. She made her way to the door, put her shoes on, and walked outside into the hallway, down which Sion just happened to be walking.

"Ah, Sion. Good timing. What's going on?"

"Well, the— Uh, Mia, maybe you should go change first."

“Huh?”

After a few puzzled blinks, she looked down at herself, at which point she nodded.

“Oh. I think you’re right.”

Currently, Mia’s attire consisted of a big, puffy nightgown made with a generous amount of wool, a nightcap that resembled a floppy witch’s hat, and her shoes. It wasn’t her most fashionable moment. Also, there was probably something to be said about appearing in public in a nightgown as well, but the clashing styles of her outfit took the spotlight for now.

“Anne would indeed give me an earful if she saw me like this. I suppose I’ll have to change then.”

She retreated inside her room and quickly put on something more presentable, after which she followed Sion to the mayor’s office.

As soon as they entered the room, they heard Lambert’s voice.

“There’s no way... They can’t possibly have sent the army here this fast...”

“But the fact is they just sent a messenger demanding our surrender.”

“What is going on?” asked Sion.

Lambert turned to them, his face slightly paler than usual.

“I just received a report from our comrades that the royal army has taken up position in the streets, and leading them is the second prince, Abel Remno.”

“My! Prince Abel!” Mia exclaimed, sheer delight bubbling up at the unexpectedly welcome development.

That’s right. Some of you may have forgotten, but Mia was a few parts “lovestruck maiden.” The rest of her was composed of decidedly unmaidenly qualities like staring with a creepy grin at the body of a handsome boy and getting cheeky at a couple of young delinquents... but in any case, her inner girl-on-a-first-date woke from her long slumber and up went her heart rate.

Oh thank the moons I took a bath last night!

But her delight was cut short by Sion’s response.

“The only reason a member of the royal family would personally lead an army here is to rouse the troops for battle,” he said with a bitter grimace. “The Diamond Legion is already in position, which means he’s bringing two things: reinforcements and

the king's command." He lowered his voice to a whisper. "So that is the path you have chosen to walk, Prince Abel..."

There was a moment of silence. Then he turned to Lambert.

"Tell me exactly what the messenger said. Also, I'd like to know where the national army is currently deployed."

"What? But—"

"If you want the support of my kingdom, then I suggest you obey."

For a second, Lambert pursed his lips in thought, but he soon nodded and directed his subordinate to comply. Sion then turned to Mia.

"Mia, I assume you want to be there?"

"Huh? Uh, but..."

She thought she'd say yes, but the word caught in her throat. She'd be heading, she realized, to what could very well become a battlefield. There would be real, imminent danger. It was hardly the kind of place she should casually be strolling into.

"Of course, even if you don't go, I will. In that sense... it might actually be easier if you don't come with me."

"What? Why?"

"Things have changed, and I now have a question for Prince Abel that must be answered. And depending on that answer..." He trailed off, but his hand moved to the sword at his waist and his eyes narrowed. "What I said to you that night... It's time to put my words to the test. I can't stand by and watch innocent people be slaughtered."

"Are you... going to kill him?" she heard a trembling voice say. It was her own.

"I hope I don't... I hope I won't have to."

Upon hearing that, something hardened in her heart. Tenderness turned to resolve, and she made up her mind. It was the hardest decision she'd ever made, and it took every ounce of determination she possessed.

Mia didn't want Abel to die.

As for Sion... she didn't want to see him perish this way either. Though she had no idea what she could do, she couldn't bear the thought of being left behind while the two of them went off somewhere to kill each other. At the very least she wanted to be there. She drew in a breath and let it back out, steeling her timid heart...

“Prince Sion, I... I will go with yo—!”

...And accidentally bit her tongue in the middle of her rousing declaration of resolve, hard.

The moral of this story, then, is to stay within your means, because overreaching will lead to pain and failure.

Nevertheless, she fixed Sion with a look of determination. The determination, that is, to hide the fact that her tongue hurt so much she was nearly in tears.

Chapter 38: Reunion and Duel

Abel's horse whinnied. He gave it a pat and looked around. Surrounding him was a sea of mounted knights — the second company of Remno's rapid response force. A sharp, commanding voice boomed at his side.

"Have we still heard nothing from the rebel army?" asked Bernardo Virgil, the company commander.

He was a tall man with a thick moustache and the piercing gaze of a falcon. As one of the strongest warriors in Remno, he was referred to as the Adamantine Spear, which was a tribute to his prowess as well as a physical description of the weapon he favored. Unlike standard issue spears, which had metallic tips grafted onto wooden shafts, his was a monster of a weapon — a metallic behemoth forged entirely from a single bar of steel. Despite the punishing weight, which precluded most people from using it, he wielded the spear with ease. He was no Diamond Legionnaire, but an experienced knight with a distinguished career. Many victories against neighboring nations bore his name. Countless bandits cursed his existence, and countless more would, if only they'd lived to tell about it.

I see how this is supposed to work. Bernardo does the actual commanding, while I sit here, look pretty, and claim credit for my first campaign.

After observing the dynamics of the company for some time, Abel came to the conclusion that Bernardo was, for all intents and purposes, sent here to decorate a young prince's budding military career.

"Your Highness, how would you like to proceed? I am of the opinion that we have given them more than enough time... Fortunately, Senia's walls are low, and the rebels have fortified it with little more than a few feeble barricades. Breaking through should be a simple task."

Contrary to Abel's prediction, however, Bernardo diligently deferred to him for every significant decision. Despite the prevailing

tendency to make light of the notoriously weak-willed prince, the veteran commander always lent a willing ear to Abel's thoughts. It was a display of immaculate respect for both the chain of command and his person, but it also weighed heavily on his conscience. It meant that the suppression of his people would proceed not by chance or circumstance, but by his own judgment and command.

"A prince's duty, huh..." he mouthed quietly to himself. Then he straightened himself and looked forward. "This place will be a thorn in our side if we let it be. The troops will also appreciate a morale boost. We should strike hard and fas—"

"Report from the town!"

A scout rushed into the encampment, and the air thickened with tension.

"What's the deal? Did they send a messenger?" asked Bernando, his eyes narrowing.

The young soldier hesitated for a second before replying in an uncertain tone.

"No. I mean, not exactly... Two kids came, and... they want to speak to His Highness Prince Abel."

"A ludicrous request. The rebels wish to see His Highness in person? We'd have to be out of our minds to permit such nonsense. And what's this about kids?"

"W-Well, that's just it. They're kids. But, um... not regular kids, apparently. They claim to be classmates of His—"

"Excuse us."

Brushing aside the scout's sputtering explanation, a boy stepped onto the scene. He walked with the grace and gravitas of a natural sovereign, and soldiers found themselves reflexively stepping aside to clear a path.

"Prince Sion! Why are you here? Wait, but... that means..." Abel's eyes widened as a second figure appeared from behind Sion. "Princess Mia..."

"Prince Abel. I've missed you."

Her argent hair reflected the sunlight, emitting a soft glow like the moon. Wisdom radiated from her eyes, deep and coruscant. Then, there was her pearlescent skin... It was all as he'd remembered. With all the breathtaking beauty of that night at the dance party, Mia Luna Tearmoon appeared before Abel.

"And I you. Alas, how I wish seeing me were the aim of your visit..."

“Oh? And what other aim do you suggest for my visit?” She gave him a quizzical head tilt, which Abel knew to be an act. Seeing him was certainly her intention, but it was nothing more than a corollary — an afterthought — of what she’d really come here to do. The purpose of her visit was undoubtedly to put an end to this foolish conflict. The Great Sage of the Empire, he reasoned, was not going to come all the way here just to say hi to him.

She… probably won’t take my side. But even so, I…

For one vulnerable moment, he allowed himself to waver. Then he put his heart aside and donned the armor of resolve.

“Prince Sion,” he said, his voice hardening, “what about you, then? Surely, you will not make the same claim as her? I trust you are not here for tea and talk.”

“No, I am not. At first, I’d only intended to accompany Princess Mia as her guard. Now, however… I’ve seen too much to stand idly by.” Sion placed his palm on his sword hilt. “The chance has come earlier than expected… but it’s time to fulfill my summer promise. You shall have your rematch.”

The declaration caught Abel off guard, and he stared blankly for a second before quickly collecting himself.

“I take that to mean… you’re challenging me to a duel?”

“Yes, though, should you choose to return to your capital with your sword still sheathed, I will be more than happy to wait until winter for the next tournament.”

Abel stared hard at Sion, who cocked a provocative brow. Just as Abel was about to speak, Bernando stepped forward.

“Their words bear no weight, Your Highness. Disregard them. To challenge the prince and commander of an army to single combat is ludicro—”

“Stand down, Bernardo. This is no mere duel. The Crown Prince of Sunkland has just placed his life on the line for the justice he believes in. Turning down his challenge would deal a serious blow to our soldiers’ morale.”

Abel dismissed Bernardo’s advice. He glanced at Mia. A bitter smile flashed across his lips.

And… a part of me just doesn’t want to back down with her watching.

He let out a short breath.

“So be it, Prince Sion. Let us duel.”

M-My? How odd...

Mia looked from Abel to Sion. She scratched her head. Then she looked at them again.

I... did just say to Prince Abel that I came here to see him, right? Based on what I know from Elise's story, isn't the next step supposed to be... you know, a hug, maybe? Or at least some smiles here and there, and then everyone pats each other on the back and goes home and the problem is solved?

That was, after all, why Mia had been standing there with her arms outstretched, waiting for Abel to embrace her. To her bewilderment, the story no longer seemed to be revolving around her. There were two new protagonists, and all eyes were now focused on them.

Is it just me or have I been in this situation before? Ah, right. It was during the swordsmanship tournament when we were eating sandwiches for lunch. Just like now, those two went off into their own conversation and left me hanging...

"The roads of my kingdom are broad and level. They will suffice as an arena for our duel."

Mia looked up to find that the two princes were already walking away.

"Prince Abel! Wait! A duel? You can't—"

She rushed to catch up, only to be stopped by a muscular arm.

"Bernardo," Abel said, turning his head back toward her, "by my authority as prince, I command you to protect the Princess of Tearmoon. You are to ensure that no harm befalls her."

"Are you certain, Your Highness?" asked Bernardo, still holding Mia back.

"I need the princess to bear witness to the legitimacy of our duel. She holds a neutral voice, belonging to neither Remno nor Sunkland. Should the King of Sunkland question the outcome, her word will surely appease him."

"No! You can't! Prince Abel! This is all wrong!"

"I... was looking forward to our reunion, Princess Mia. I only wish it had happened under better circumstances. I wish... we could have..." His voice wavered. He shook his head and huffed out a short, mocking laugh at himself. "All that purpose and resolve, and when the time comes, I get cold feet..."

He set his jaw. Then he turned away, severing their gaze as surely as if he'd used a sword.

“Prince Abel!”

Her scream failed to move him. Their gazes failed to meet. His eyes were now locked firmly on the boy standing in front of him.

“Are your ears deaf to her words?”

“They are deaf to all words. The die has been cast. There is no stopping now, Prince Sion. I thought you, of all people, would understand.”

“Rot covers your throne, Abel Remno. Do you choose to rot with it?”

“Rotting or not, a kingdom needs a throne. A world without order is a world in Hell. Chaos breeds suffering, and the people will be its kindling.”

Wipe the kingdom clean of royals and nobles, and bandits would swoop in to fill the void. Order would collapse. Peace would end.

“If corruption has tainted the throne, then it is my duty to cleanse it, not destroy it.”

There was a tone of finality to Abel’s voice. He said no more, and quietly drew his sword.

“I cannot allow you to trample over your people,” replied Sion.

To that end, he was willing to initiate a military intervention to depose the entirety of the corrupt regime, going so far as to consider long-term occupation, in which Sunkland would assume the duties of governing until a new administration was established and operational. Irreconcilable was his stance with that of Abel, whose loyalty lay with kin and kingdom.

“Should you choose to partake in this brutality, Abel Remno, then I shall end you here with my own sword.”

With a flash, his sword leapt from scabbard to hand. The finely honed edge gleamed, its sharpness second only to its wielder’s gaze.

Just like that day in the arena, Abel lifted his weapon high above his head in his trademark stance of all-out aggression. Sion, meanwhile, held his blade with a loose arm, its tip angled down in a stance primed to parry and counter.

“Nostalgic, isn’t it?” said Sion. “But the way this ends will be anything but. Today, you will not catch me off guard.”

“Nor do I intend to. We both know I’m a one-trick pony, so let’s see if the trick still works.”

Suddenly, there was a burst of movement... and it came from Sion! He dashed in for a surprise attack! Keeping his body low to

the ground, he lunged forward into striking distance. Having previously seen that Sion employed a reactionary style, Abel was unprepared for the abrupt assault. With a reflexive step backward, Abel broke from his stance, giving Sion the opening he sought. His advantage, however, proved short-lived, shattered by the devastating arc of Abel's strike as he, balance impaired and feet unplanted, nonetheless brought his blade crashing down in the middle of his retreat. His sword was a blur, and Sion rushed to react.

"Ugh!"

The speed and power of the swing far exceeded Sion's expectation, and he whipped his arm up just swiftly enough to catch the blow with his own sword. The two weapons met with bone-rattling force, and he had to take a step back to soften the impact.

"A mighty blow for an unready foe. How mightier, then, were you not off your tempo?" Sion quipped as he continued to back off. "Well then... It appears that I'm not the only one who has been preparing for this rematch."

"Unlike some people, I'm no natural. When you're training to beat a genius, you learn to go the extra mile."

"Your effort is commendable," replied Sion. "It has bought you time and respect, but victory will not come so cheaply."

Abel resumed his overhead stance. Then he went on the offensive, smoothly transferring the momentum of his forward dash into a powerful strike. Sion responded by angling his blade, using it like a rail to lead the strike awry. Sparks flew as metal rode metal, but the force was so great that it still drove the offending tip through his arm, leaving a bloody gash.

It didn't faze him.

"Haa!"

Though known for his vicious ripostes, Sion had never demonstrated his signature strike — not even on the day of the swordsmanship tournament. That all changed as his sword broke from the clash and lashed out in a ferocious sweep that traced a trail with surgical precision through Abel's side... Who took it without wincing. Instead, he roared and drove his shoulder into Sion.

"Ugh! Okay... So that's your game. You dodge into me instead of away, huh. Not bad, Abel Remno."

“You’re no pushover yourself, Prince Sion. One wrong move there and I’d be a dead man,” said Abel before glancing at his bloody side. He patted at it. “I’m wearing chain mail, and you went through it like a hot knife through butter.”

He laughed. They went at it again in a fountain of fiery sparks and crimson petals. Each bone-shattering blow from Abel was answered with a parry and riposte. The Sunkland prince fought with deadly grace, spinning and twirling as though in a dance. The spectating soldiers all held their breaths as they beheld a dizzying flurry of motion, accentuated by arcs of bright red blood.

Faced with the relentless onslaught of a genius swordsman, Abel brandished his only weapon — his staunch refusal to yield. When staring down a blade, hesitation was the norm. Abel cast that norm aside. Where a normal person would freeze or flinch, he did not. As each strike approached, he stepped into it, closing the gap that recoil should have widened. Then he forced down his fear and stepped forward more, putting himself even closer to his enemy but farther from a lethal blow. With the added protection of his military armor, he could be wounded, but he would not fall.

“Well, color me surprised... I didn’t think you’d be such a tough nut to crack,” said Sion.

“Hah. Glad to know I don’t disappoint,” replied Abel. He smiled, but the expression was strained.

Genius is the swordplay of Sion Sol Sunkland. Abel could tell that Sion’s blade was striking him with more and more power. For a prodigy like the Sunkland prince, readjusting his spacing in the midst of battle was a trivial task.

I doubt I’ll last much longer... The next... is probably the last...

Abel dropped to one knee, his face a mask of pain, and let out a breath. Then, out of the corner of his eye, he noticed a familiar figure. It was Mia.

Ah... She’s *watching. I can’t afford to throw in the towel.*

He drew a deep breath and forced himself to his feet.

“En garde, Prince Sion. Let’s end this!”

He tightened his grip on his sword, willing all his remaining strength into his arms for one final strike.

“Enough! Please stop this, both of you! You’re going to die!”

The sight of the two princes preparing to trade one final blow chilled Mia to the core, and she raised her voice in another

desperate plea. To her horror, neither paid her any heed. Their weapons remained drawn, and despair filled her heart.

Ahh... In the end, my words are meaningless, aren't they? Just like before...

Her vision blurred, and suddenly, she was back in the old empire. Led by Ludwig, she raced from place to place, trying to placate the resentful masses. Again and again, she pleaded with them, speaking as the Princess of Tearmoon, but her words were lost in a sea of anger and hatred. Ultimately, her efforts had proven futile. She'd failed to win their trust.

It's the same as back then...

Helpless and hopeless, she watched as both princes dashed forward. Her whole world seemed to darken as they raised their swords, each ready to plunge theirs into the chest of the other. In a way, she thought, perhaps this was inevitable. Perhaps she was the fool for ever thinking otherwise. Faced with people who'd already drawn their swords and resolved to fight, words were ultimately powerless. And hers, especially, reached no one.

...Or did they?

Did her words truly reach no one? No! Absolutely not! Though they fell on the deaf ears of the dueling princes, the bonds she'd forged would carry her voice. Whither would it go? Who was listening? Why, her faithful subjects, of course!

"Now aren't you two a bloody handful..."

A form flew past Mia in a blur, leaving a burst of wind in its wake that caught a tear on her cheek and lifted it into the air. The crystalline droplet sparkled in the sunlight.

"Time to break it up, boys. You're making our dear princess cry."

The form continued to surge forward like a sentient gale, soaring up into the sky before crashing back down between the two princes just as their swords were about to meet. Abel swung his blade down. Sion swept his up. There was a sharp clang— No, two! Then a pair of swords twirled through the air and landed on the ground. The two princes, both disarmed, froze and stared down the blades now pointed at their chests toward the man who held them.

Dion Alaia, a sword in each hand, smiled. "See, our princess is a bit of a crybaby, so I'd appreciate it if you stopped giving her more reasons to make a scene."

"Ahh..."

The sudden appearance of an ally brought a wave of relief that washed through Mia and turned her legs to jelly. She swayed a little before toppling backward, but she landed, not on the hard surface of the ground, but in the tender embrace of something warm and soft.

"Milady!"

A familiar voice rang in her ear. She spun to find an equally familiar face.

"A-Anne!"

Her first and most faithful subject held her in her arms, tears streaming down her face.

"Anne... Anne..."

Mia wrapped her arms around Anne and squeezed, burying her face in her chest. The precious moment, however, was interrupted by a roar of fury.

"Insolent knave! You dare brandish a weapon at His Highness Prince Abel? Lower it at once!" The man who had been guarding Mia, Bernardo the Adamantine Spear, glared with rage at Dion.

"Have you no honor? No shame? You have intruded upon a sacred duel between princes!"

Dion chuckled.

"Well, well, well, I guess I have. Yeah, I can see why you'd be pissed, what with your precious prince dueling to the death while you grind your teeth resisting the urge to help out. Meanwhile, little old me just strolls in and joins the fun. Infuriating, isn't it? Thing is, my allegiance is sworn to neither of Their Highnesses."

"Silence, scoundrel! Your impudence is deserving of death! Consider your life forfeit!"

The enraged commander rushed toward Dion who, in response, dropped the sword in his left hand and switched to a two-handed grip for the one in his right. He watched his approaching foe with a wolfish grin.

Chapter 39: The Empire's Finest Versus the Adamantine Spear

The Adamantine Spear was a name that simultaneously described both weapon and wielder. Bernardo raised his armament of choice — a hefty beast of pure steel from tip to shaft that normal soldiers strained to even lift — with fearsome ease and charged.

"For your insolence, you shall die by my spear!"

Like a one-man stampede, he thundered toward Dion with the force and ferocity of a whole line of cavalry. His momentum coupled with the power of his thrust propelled his spear forward at terrifying speed.

Ker-ching!

A heavy metallic clang reverberated through the air. The next instant, their overlapping forms parted again and Bernardo came to a stop behind Dion. Neither moved to disturb the ensuing silence. Eventually, Dion spoke, his arm still outstretched from the swing of his sword.

"I see. A deadly thrust indeed... Most impressive. I have one question though..." He turned with a smile and pointed with his sword. "Why are you still holding that thing? Are you going to try to beat me to death with it?"

On cue, the metallic tip of a spear whistled as it fell from the sky and embedded itself in the ground. The scene drew little reaction from the onlooking soldiers. It was, after all, a common sight on the battlefield for a spear to lose its head. Then someone gasped. It was echoed by a few others. Soon, a wave of commotion began to spread through the audience as they came to a startling realization — Bernardo's spear was one unbroken bar of steel. The only way to separate its tip was...

"Cutting through steel. An impressive feat. It appears that I am faced with a competent foe."

Bernardo turned as well and examined the mirror-smooth cross section of his spear shaft. During the split second they'd clashed,

Dion had swung his sword with blinding speed, slicing clean through the thick steel rod.

"Well, you tend to step it up when there's an audience, right? Especially when said audience happens to be your royal mistress. What about you, though? What're you gonna do with your, you know, *stick*?"

"Hmph. Obviously... I'm going to beat you to death with it." Bernardo twirled his spear-turned-staff with expert flair and smiled. In his hands, the decapitated polearm remained a deadly weapon, as it still had more than enough heft to smash skulls and shatter bones. He was entirely unperturbed by the unexpected alteration to his weapon. If anything, he looked positively thrilled. This time, it was Dion's turn to pay his opponent a compliment.

"Bahaha, you're a real riot. I think I like you. Good to know Remno has its fair share of crazy bastards. Mind if I ask you your name?"

"Bernardo Virgil, Captain of the Knights of the Second Company."

"Oh damn. The famed Adamantine Spear. Nice, nice. I see you live up to your name. Remno's got some serious heavyweights in their service."

"May I know your name as well, Sir Knight?"

"Dion Alaia. I don't mean to brag, but I consider myself the strongest knight in the empire." He paused. "Hm, you know what? I guess I do mean to brag."

This quip was met with a snort.

"Hah. If you, Sir, are the empire's finest, then Tearmoon poses little threat."

"...Big words, Adamantine Spear. You'd better be able to back them up, or you're really gonna regret it." Dion pulled his other sword out of the ground and again assumed his dual-wielding stance.

"Regret? There is no place in the spearman's code for such feeble sentiments. We abide by three tenets: charge, pierce, and breach." Bernardo readied his headless spear, preparing to drive its end, blunt though it may be, straight through the chest of his opponent. All the onlookers held their breath as the two peerless warriors traded deadly glares. Just as the air began to thicken with lethal tension, a bold, resonant voice shattered the asphyxiating silence.

“Enough! Know that you stand in the presence of Her Highness Princess Mia!”

Suddenly, Ludwig was standing beside her.

“It is her will that all fighting shall cease immediately! Both of you, lower your weapons!”

Dion shot her a glance before letting out a very conspicuous sigh of reluctant resignation and plunging both swords into the ground. Then he gave Bernardo a questioning gaze, who tsked and lowered his “spear” with a grimace.

Bernardo had joined the fray for two reasons. The first was obvious: a man of unknown identity was holding a sword within swinging distance of Abel, and that was a situation that needed to be resolved immediately. Though the man displayed no intention of harming the prince, that didn’t mean Bernardo could just stand there and twiddle his thumbs. The second and more important reason was to take command of the situation — to have the power. Unfortunately, with his weapon now lowered, he was no longer the center of attention, and all eyes naturally drifted toward the figure who now occupied center stage. The ball was in Mia’s court; she had the power.

“...Eh?”

Which was just about the last thing she’d expected. She was, after all, not the only Highness present. Abel was a prince, albeit second in line, and Sion was her equal. Nothing about her should have stood out. However, Bernardo’s reputation for being a fierce knight had made Dion’s dominating performance against him all the more incredible, and to then see him — the man who’d both proclaimed to be the empire’s finest and had the chops to back it up — obediently sheath his sword as soon as Mia’s name was mentioned... It was undeniable proof of her authority.

Through a deft display of social manipulation, Ludwig had placed her firmly at the top of the perceived hierarchy of power. Convinced that the stage was set, he turned to her and, with a mixture of pride and anticipation, passed her the proverbial baton.

She really didn’t want that baton. Her legs still hadn’t solidified, and her face was a weepy mess.

Huh? What? Why is everyone looking at me?

Having been made the focus of all the soldiers’ gazes, her chicken heart quivered, and she almost squawked with terror. The only thing that stopped her was the comforting presence of her

loyal vassals. With a pleading look, she turned to Anne. Her first and most faithful subject promptly nodded, wiped away Mia's tears, cleaned her face, touched up her hair, and nodded again.

"Don't worry. We're right behind you."

It was then that Mia realized her fate was sealed.

Ahh... I see. There's no getting out of this, is there?

With no other choice, she braced herself and turned toward the soldiers, her tear-moistened eyes and bath-cleansed skin imparting upon her an aura of ethereal beauty.

Later, when Elise published her "Princess Chronicles," readers would find within it an excerpt quoting a soldier who had been present during this confrontation. The passage went as follows.

"When she appeared, it was [as if the moon goddess herself] was [descending upon the battlefield.]"

Chapter 40: Mia's "Legendary" Speech

For those who are starting to forget, it bears repeating that Mia was, in fact, born and raised a princess and therefore, was quite used to speaking in front of crowds. Back in the previous timeline there had been times when, accompanied by Ludwig, she would appear before large gatherings of people and give speeches, all the while being constantly insulted and struggling to project her voice over the angry din. Even so...

Th-This is sort of scary!

She shuddered a little at the concentrated onslaught of so many gazes. To be fair, it was only natural to feel nervous when a bunch of armed young men were all waiting with bated breath for her next words.

Geez, they could at least be nice enough to make some noise or something. It's so quiet I could hear a pin drop! How am I supposed to relax like this?

With truly royal arrogance, she mentally chastised her audience for failing to provide her with a suitably conversational environment. How dare they listen so intently? What if she fumbled a sentence? It'd be so embarrassing!

"Everyone, please lend me your ears. I am Mia Lun— Ack!" she said as her tongue failed to move out of the way of her teeth.

In a most timely display of karmic justice, she fumbled her opening sentence in the worst way possible, by bungling her own name. It was also rather painful, as she'd bit it in the exact same spot as last time. She hoped it wasn't going to turn into a canker.

As for her audience... They were caught completely off guard, and the tension on their faces vanished at once. A few burst out laughing. Most regarded the red-cheeked Mia with good-natured smiles. Ludwig, meanwhile, was stunned. He stared at her, awed by the fact that it'd taken her little more than half a sentence to capture the hearts of every soldier present.

"No way... Was that intentional too?" he murmured, blissfully ignorant of how far he was drifting from reality.

Mia had no such luck. She was intensely aware of her blunder and, visibly shaking from embarrassment, she shambled back toward Anne and buried her face in her shirt.

"...I don't want to do this anymore."

"M-Milady! Don't give up yet!"

"...I've never been so humiliated in my entire life!" she exclaimed, funneling her emotions into anger; it helped take her mind off her shame.

Not that she had anyone to get angry at, of course, considering it was entirely her own fault. Nevertheless, the outburst allowed her to collect herself, and she attempted her speech again... Only to realize there was a problem.

Huh. Now I remember. I have *no speech.*

It barely even needs to be said that Mia did not have a plan to stop the Remno army. The whole point of coming here was to see Abel. She hadn't put much thought into the matter to begin with, and now that her original objective was complete, she was even more clueless as to what should come next.

Wh-Wh-What should I do?

In an effort to hide her fluster, she put on a big, bright smile. Beaming from ear to ear, she swept her gaze across the surrounding soldiers, who found themselves further enamored by her charm. The power of a good bath was not to be underestimated; she positively glowed. She smiled and smiled. A drop of sweat rolled down her forehead.

I-I can't just keep smiling like this! I need to say something!

Some people find silence hard to bear, and start talking to compensate. This often results in them blabbing about things better left unsaid. Mia happened to be one of these people, and she felt a desperate need to fill the silence with her own voice. As a result, she blurted out the first thing that came to mind.

"You know, I really wish all of you gentlemen from the Remno army would just pack up and go home."

Blunt. But honest, at least.

"Pack up... and go home? You expect us to leave the rebel army alone and withdraw? What you suggest is absolutely ludicrous!"

For obvious reasons, her request was not well received. Bernardo's objection came hard and fast, coupled with an angry glare that seemed to say, "What the hell is this girl talking about?" It made Mia flinch.

Eeek! Th-This man is terribly frightening! He reeks of something familiar... I know! I smelled the same thing from Captain Dion, and it's danger!

Being fixed with a menacing glare from the Remno commander finally sent enough of a jolt through Mia to get her brain working again. While *took her long enough* was definitely the right reaction to have here, one must also consider its idiomatic foil: *better late than never*. With her mental faculties in working order again, she concluded that there was but one way for her to escape this predicament.

"L-Ludicrous? The only thing that's ludicrous... is for you to be fighting each other."

Her method? Straight up flattery. Her message was, in essence, "This is a gathering of riffraff we're talking about. Self-respecting knights such as yourselves should not deign to brawl with the rabble."

Her sweet-talking, however, only darkened the mood, and a couple of soldiers even began to glower at her. The explanation wasn't complicated; from their perspective, it felt like they were putting their lives on the line to fight for peace and order, only to have their courage belittled. Some of the soldiers wore puzzled frowns. It would have been understandable if her criticism were levied at the ethicality of slaughtering civilians. They could even stomach her condemnation if she were arguing entirely from a pacifistic point of view, as the fear of conflict could certainly push a young girl to voice her opposition to war and bloodshed.

Her language suggested it was neither. Of all the things she could have said, she chose to throw Bernardo's words right back at him, describing their actions as ludicrous. Not cruel, not immoral, but *ludicrous*. Why?

By this point, rumors about Mia had begun to spread throughout Remno. Those familiar with Prince Abel had heard stories from him about the Great Sage of the Empire, who'd turned the weak-willed prince into a dependable young lord. Slowly, the crowd began to doubt the righteousness of their mission.

"If the Great Sage of the Empire says this battle is ludicrous," they thought to themselves, "then maybe it actually is?"

Doubt crept into their hearts. Unsettled, they waited on her next words with growing anticipation.

Eek! I-I can't believe my lip service isn't working on these people!

Mia had never been a smooth talker, so, despite what she thought of herself, ineffectual lip service was actually the norm for her. Nevertheless, she astutely picked up on the shifting sentiments in the soldiers' gazes. Some were now infused with curiosity; others, with anger. Cold sweat dripped down the back of her neck as it occurred to her that she might be in a precarious position. She opened her mouth to speak... and a voice rang out. It took her a moment to realize it wasn't her own.

"Now isn't that an intriguing choice of words, Mia. In fact, I believe this isn't the first time you've used such perturbing language. What did you say the other day again? That 'something didn't add up'?" said a now-bandaged Sion as he crossed his arms and gave her a thoughtful look.

"That's it!"

She jumped on it. She had no idea what "it" was, but she jumped on it anyway. Anything to change the topic.

"Y-You're absolutely right!" she continued. "I did say that. Something *doesn't* add up."

Luckily, as soon as she said it, she felt it again — the unpleasant sense that something shapeless and invisible was stuck to her thoughts. It really didn't add up. Something about this whole situation was entirely wrong. It wasn't so much reasoned analysis as it was intuition — an unconscious insight gained in her previous life when the embers of Tearmoon's revolution had yet to burst into flame.

She'd spent those days watching the empire crumble in agonizing detail as Ludwig delivered her report after dreadful report in his trademark caustic tone. The things she'd seen since coming to Remno were far removed from the Tearmoon of her past. However, the cause of insurrection and the ensuing sequence of events were disconcertingly similar.

The parallel between Outcount Rudolvon and the Chancellor Dasayev Donovan was striking. In both cases, the persecution of a noble who took the people's side triggered a popular revolt. Mirrored again was the subsequent intervention by the Kingdom of Sunkland, who stepped in to save the masses from the tyranny of their own ruler. What were the chances that two locations with completely different conditions would see the same sequence of events play out?

No way. That can't possibly be coincidence.

Viewed in this light, it was almost as if someone was trying to set Sunkland up to look like a crusader of justice. Was it the wish of a higher power? Or the doings of a demonic will?

"It feels almost like... we're dealing with a terribly devious scheme."

At that, a problem occurred to her.

Wait a minute... But how am I supposed to explain this to everyone?

Indeed, she'd be hard-pressed to explain why things didn't add up, seeing as her reasoning was based on experiences from a previous life.

Wh-What should I do?!

As she quickly descended into panic, an unexpected voice came to her rescue.

"A devious scheme, you say... Interesting. Do you suggest, then, that this revolt is the product of conspiracy? That there are nefarious actors who seek to divide our kingdom through unrest, and that we are but hapless fools playing into their hands as we shed the blood of our brethren? Is that why... you referred to this battle as ludicrous, Your Highness?" asked Bernardo. His eyes were still fixed on Mia, but the menace that had colored them was replaced by intrigue.

"Eh?"

Mia gaped as her two loyal subjects chimed in as well.

"Your Highness saw through this conspiracy so swiftly. Again, I am awed by your wisdom."

"You're amazing, milady!"

The only one unmoved was Dion, who crossed his arms and watched the proceedings from the sidelines.

"Which would suggest that Prince Sion knew as well..." Bernardo mused as he turned toward Sion. "Was that why you risked your life in a duel to stop His Highness?"

Sion shook his head.

"No, I—"

Two dainty hands slammed across his mouth.

Wh-What in the moons do you think you're doing?! *There's a time for honesty, and there's a time to* not be stupid! *Why would you say no when everyone's ready to wrap things up and move on?!*

Sure, Sion's reason for fighting Abel might have stemmed from a clash of ideals and a mutual refusal to bend rather than knowledge of a conspiracy, and yes, pretending it was the latter

might be disrespectful toward Abel and sort of unscrupulous... But Mia couldn't care less about propriety right now. Keeping Sion firmly muffled, she hastily formulated a line of logic to convince him to shut up. The speed with which she did so was breathtaking, knocking out a personal best for cerebral rpm in the process.

"U-Uh, more specifically, I'd say you're maybe about half right."

"Half right?"

Bernardo raised an eyebrow at her. The gesture was mimicked by Sion, to whom she hastily whispered, "Look, you came here to protect me, right? Which means if my goal was to deal with this devious scheme thing, then that has to be one of your goals too. So on one hand, you have whatever you came to do, and on the other, you have what I came to do. Half and half, so he's half right. *Right*?"

She spoke in a tone that suggested she was not going to take no for an answer.

"Well, I suppose you could say that—"

"Good! Then it's settled!"

She declared this with a tone of utter finality before turning slightly rabid eyes on the surrounding soldiers.

Well?! How's that?! S-Surely, that was enough to convince them!

Seeing that nobody voiced any complaints, her expression brightened with relief. Right at that moment, Bernardo spoke.

"Unfortunately..." His voice was grim. "That is no reason for us to leave, Your Highness. While I do wish to hear your basis for suspecting foul play... Even if you do provide concrete proof of the existence of such individuals, our mission remains unchanged. We must still disband the rebel army and restore order to this town."

Oh no... I-I figured it wasn't going to be that easy, but still...

She hung her head, crestfallen...

"The same, I suspect, is true for them. Upon learning that their taxes will not be lowered, I likewise doubt the rebel army will lower their weapons."

...Only to perk up again at Bernardo's statement.

"My, I do believe you are mistaken. What the rebel army — that is, the people involved in this uprising — is demanding is the release of the Chancellor, Dasayev Donovan."

Her reply sent a wave of commotion rolling through the Remno army.

"...Your Highness, have you received word from His Majesty

that Lord Donovan has been imprisoned?" asked Bernardo.

"No... He never mentioned anything of the sort. This is the first time I've heard of such a thing."

Abel, who'd returned from having his injuries treated, shook his head in bewilderment. Mia gave him a quick once-over and, seeing that he'd sustained no major injuries, breathed a sigh of relief.

"I see... It appears then that we would be wise to listen to Her Highness in this regard. Should we manage to rescue Lord Donovan from his mysterious captors, then we may indeed succeed in convincing the rebel army to stand down, but... Until we know where he is being held, there is precious little we can do," said Bernardo.

Dion nodded. "As a matter of fact, I was just thinking about that myself. Being all wise and sagely," he said, glancing at Mia, "I assume Her Highness has already figured out where we should go to find him. Thing is, are we going to discover a man or a body?"

The Chancellor was no hostage. He was a lit fuse — a mere instrument — for inciting the masses to revolt. There was no need to keep him alive. Indeed, his trans-dimensional counterpart, Outcount Rudolvon, had not survived his role as the catalyst of Tearmoon's revolution. Dion's concern was very reasonable given the circumstances.

"Eh?"

Obvious, unless you were Mia, of course. She no longer had any control over the conversation, and it had plunged forward, leaving her lost in the dust.

"Uh... Huh? That's... uh..."

Faced again with a question she couldn't answer, help came — again — from an unexpected source.

"Allow me to answer that question."

Hearing a familiar voice, she spun to find Keithwood smiling awkwardly as he scratched at his mop of red hair. Perched on his shoulder was a bird with a beautiful coat of black feathers.

"Keithwood!" exclaimed Sion. "You're safe! And— Wait... what's with the crow?"

The young attendant shrugged.

"Depends on who's asking, I guess. For them, a herald of fortune. But for us... probably a bringer of bad news."

The seeds Mia sowed had spread far and wide, burying

themselves in the soil of distant lands. As they grew, they lifted the heart of a certain black bird. The bird then returned the favor, carrying the young saplings, now infused with Monica's message of hope, back into the hands of the one who could avert this tragedy — the Great Sage of the Empire.

The time of their bloom drew ever closer.

"I'd like to report to Prince Sion first. Please excuse us."

Mia waited for Keithwood and Sion to distance themselves before approaching Abel. She figured they had some time before anything else could happen.

"Prince Abel, are you all right?"

"Yes, thanks to your two-sworded vassal over there. If the duel had continued, I might not be standing here right now. It looks like I still have a lot more training to do."

As he spoke, Mia realized something.

Is it just me... or does he look to be in even better shape than before? My...

The last time they'd met was before the summer holidays. Compared to then, he was a little taller, more muscular, and generally had a more regal air. A mesmerized sigh escaped her lips as she beheld the maturing prince.

"Hm? What's the matter, Princess Mia?" he asked with one eyebrow raised.

Only then did Mia realize she'd been openly ogling him, and she hastily averted her gaze.

"N-Nothing! Nothing at all."

"Are you sure? You look a little flushed... Maybe you pushed yourself too hard coming here."

"My, how considerate. But if anyone has been pushing themselves, I'd say it was you— Ah!" Suddenly, she remembered something. "Hmph! I'm not falling for that! You're a terrible person and I hate you!"

"Wha— Falling for what? What did I do?"

She pointed an accusing finger at the flustered prince.

"You know very well what you did, Prince Abel! You ignored me back there and went off to do something terribly dangerous! I bet you didn't even spare a thought for how I would feel!" Then, with the most indignant of hmphs, she looked away, her arms crossed and her expression crosser. "And then there's Sion... I can't

believe him! He actually tried to hurt you! The two of you, I swear... ”

The thought made her so upset that she bristled with anger. Abel watched her with a faint smile. At first, it was fond. Then, it turned wistful.

“I’m Prince Abel, but he... He’s just Sion, huh...”

His voice was barely more than a whisper. For a few seconds, Mia stared at him, confused by what he meant. Then it hit her.

Oh? Do I smell jealousy? Is he upset that I don’t sound as close to him as I do Sion?

She identified his concealed emotions with masterful precision. Mia’s instincts, you see, were razor-sharp when it counted — during the most frivolous, inconsequential situations. Having glimpsed into his heart, a small grin spread across her lips.

To be making such a big fuss over what we call each other... Oh, he’s such a boy. How adorable.

She regarded him with smug superiority, blissfully ignorant of the profound hypocrisy therein. This was, after all, the same person who’d gone into a tailspin when Sion had dropped the “princess” from her name. Fortunately for her, such inconvenient facts had long drifted past the distant horizon of her memory.

“That was to hide our identities. There’s no deeper meaning behind it. We are technically undercover right now.”

“Ah, I see. So that’s why. I’m... glad to hear it.”

The sight of his relieved smile pleased her even more. At this point, she was practically glowing with delight, having wrapped all her anger and indignation into a ball and hurled it past the same horizon that had consumed her prior memories. The horizon of her memory, you see, was never more than a stone’s throw away.

Oh, what am I going to do with you. All right, all right, you win. I suppose I’ll drop the “prince” for you as well. In fact, seeing as you’re still a child, it’s quite normal for a mature young lady like me to call you “Abel.”

So, with the abundant confidence of an adult, she spoke to the young prince in a voice filled with maturity and composure.

“U-Uh... So, um... A-A... A-A-Ab...”

Maturity and composure. What do those words mean again?

“I... I won’t mind if you, um, c-c-call me... Mia. And I’ll, um... call you... A-A... A-A-Abel.”

She stammered and sputtered, trying to say his name. In the

end, she only succeeded by appending a very quiet “prince” to the front. Fortunately, he didn’t seem to hear that part, and his eyes went wide in shock. It took her a dozen tries and stressed her out to no end, but she finally managed to say his name by itself. Abel *beamed*.

“Really?! It would be an absolute honor for me!”

Pure delight radiated from him like the innocence of a child, which, juxtaposed against the burgeoning maturity he’d displayed moments before, proved mutually accentuating and captured Mia’s heart. It pounded out a rapid staccato in her chest as her cheeks grew hot and her vision swam. She swayed a little, feeling like she was floating a few inches off the ground. The abundant confidence of an adult was nowhere to be seen.

“Uh, so... In that case... M-Mia?”

“Y-Yes?!”

Hearing her name made her straighten like she’d been caught with her hand in the cookie jar. Breathing hard, she ventured a response.

“U-Um... Yes, Abel?”

Then, overwhelmed by embarrassment, she turned her reddened face downward. For the next little while, the two fledgling lovebirds shared in that unique abashed air of the romance of youth. A ways off from them, the atmosphere surrounding Sion and Keithwood was a world of difference as they spoke to each other with grim expressions. Eventually, the Sunkland pair concluded their discussion and returned to the group. Sion’s face was a tad pale.

“Prince Abel, Mia... I need to tell you something.”

His voice was stiff, and he spoke the words like they had barbs.

“What’s the matter, Sion? You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

She was about to follow up with a quip to the effect of “Though the ghost would probably look worse after seeing you” but thought better of it when she noticed his face was ashen, the skin so devoid of color he barely looked alive. With a gulp, she asked again, “Sion? What’s wrong?”

He didn’t answer her. Instead, he stepped in front of Abel. Then he dropped to his knees, pressed his hands on the ground, and prostrated himself before the other prince.

“Eeek?!”

Startled by the abruptness of the gesture, Mia gasped and

backed off a few steps before quickly glancing at the sky to check if any farm animals had taken flight. She wasn't practicing a comedy routine; it really was that shocking. Sion Sol Sunkland had just done a full on head-to-ground bow; pigs flying would be less bizarre. Faced with the extraordinary sight of a humbled Sion, Mia was overcome with triumph. Or rather, she would have been, if she wasn't completely creeped out. She had literal goosebumps.

It's extremely satisfying to watch him go down on his knees, but this has *to be some sort of bad omen or something, right? I mean,* him? *On his knees? No way that's not a sign of something terrible to come.*

An objective bystander would have pointed out that was a very rude thing to think, but no one had access to her thoughts, so her indelicate commentary went unnoticed. While she watched the scene unfold in stunned silence, Abel spoke up.

"Stabbing swordsellers... Prince Sion, what is the meaning of this? Please, get up. Whatever you have to say, you don't have to do it like this," he said, kneeling down as well.

Sion kept his head down.

"I'm sorry, Prince Abel... I owe you an apology."

"What do you mean?" asked Abel, his expression growing tense.

His answer came from Keithwood, who stepped forward to answer in his master's place.

"Our kingdom operates an intelligence unit known as the Wind Crows. We have discovered that one of its squads has gone rogue. The members of that squad are the true culprits behind this dilemma we're faced with."

As Keithwood divulged the truth of their situation, Mia's jaw hit the ground. It was a decidedly unprincesslike expression, but at this moment in time, looking like a clown practicing in front of a mirror was the least of her concerns.

Wh-Wh-What in the moons?!

She tried to make sense of what she'd just heard, but her thoughts went round and round in futile circles.

B-But... I suppose it makes sense. The revolts in Tearmoon and Remno both worked out in Sunkland's favor, so it's not much of a stretch to imagine that Sunkland could have been behind them...

She closed her eyes. The next thing she knew, she was staring up at the guillotine again as the bleeding sun dyed everything crimson. She remembered the din of the crowd, the scent of wood, and the chilling terror of her impending death. Except now, the

roles were all wrong. The heroes were villains; the convict was the judge. The chain of events that had led to this horrific moment... was all Sunkland's doing. Sunkland had paved the road to the guillotine, and then sentenced her to death for walking it.

She shook her head, and the moment passed. When she opened her eyes again, there was no bleeding sun and no guillotine. There was only Sion, his head pressed firmly to the ground. She regarded him for a long moment, and then she understood.

Ah... This is mine too, isn't it? This apology... In a way, it's also meant for me.

Maybe it was karma. Or perhaps a whim of fate. Whatever it was, it offered closure. Justice was served; vengeance, concluded. By all measures, it should have been a moment of triumph. And yet...

This is... not a sight that feels good to look upon.

Something bitter and stifling roiled in her heart — not an ache, but close — and for some reason, she knew that even if she were to take the blade of judgment and use it to slice through Sion's neck, her shapeless affliction was unlikely to subside. The realization didn't surprise her either. In fact, it seemed all too obvious. They'd gone to school together. They'd traveled together. To then derive pleasure from watching the condemnation of someone with whom so much had been shared was unthinkable for all but the most wicked hearted.

Sion's stubborn, so he's probably tied down by all sorts of things... but there's no need for me to follow his philosophy.

If she didn't like something, then she didn't like it, and that was that. Mia First applied as much to interests as it did emotions.

But... I wonder what Abel intends to do?

The one who concerned her now was Abel. He had the right to pass judgment on Sion — to seek penalty for that which had been done. It would be the same approach and attitude that Sion himself had always employed. Those who held power bore responsibility. It was their duty to bring criminals to justice.

In this case, technically, the one who sabotaged the Kingdom of Remno wasn't Sion himself. Responsibility would fall first to Sunkland, and therefore, its king. Sion would never settle for such an arrangement. It went against everything he'd been taught and all the values by which he bound himself. In his eyes, he was not free of guilt.

Mia swallowed. Her lips felt dry. She watched with bated breath as Abel, still kneeling, moved a little closer to Sion.

“Please rise, Prince Sion. Such conduct does not become you.”

“But…”

“You can keep staring at the ground all you want if it makes you feel better, but if you ask me… When it comes to taking responsibility for your actions, I believe royalty should do so in a manner befitting royalty.”

“A manner befitting royalty…”

“Our duty is to our people, and through our rule, to deliver them peace and pleasure. I thought the only way to terminate this conflict was through the sword. However… someone has shown me that I was wrong. That there is another way to put an end to this ‘ludicrous’ battle…”

Abel glanced at Mia, and his expression softened. Then he spoke to Sion again.

“The way has already been lit for us. All that is left to us is to walk it. Am I wrong?”

“…I see. It is as you say.” Sion let out a resigned breath and got up onto his feet. “I can lower my head. I can beg forgiveness. I can even wish to be condemned… but in the end, it’s little more than the theatrics of a guilty conscience seeking an excuse to be absolved. Is that right?”

“We were saved from ourselves, you and I both. Now we have been given a chance to do what is right with these mantles we bear. It is my belief that we should approach it with gratitude and commitment.”

“Commitment… to walk this precious path the Great Sage of the Empire has lit for us.”

The two of them looked as one toward Mia, who approached them with a satisfied smile.

Chapter 41: Princess Mia… Kicks High!

Mia watched the exchange between Abel and Sion from a distance. Judging from how they were interacting, it seemed like Abel had forgiven Sion.

Oh, what a relief… Good for you, Abel.

She felt a small rush of delight at the thought that he'd come to the same conclusion as her.

Also, after all this, Sion won't be going around with his nose in the air for a good while. Wonderful, she thought as she approached him with a smug grin.

"I'm glad to see you've been forgiven."

"Yes. All thanks to you, Mia."

He turned to face her and quietly bowed his head. Beside them, Abel gave a wry shrug.

"To be fair, my father wasn't entirely in the right either. I can't shift all the blame to Sunkland."

Abel's words struck a chord with Mia, who knew with intimate familiarity that responsibility did not lie solely with the conspiracy. Tearmoon's downfall was brought about as much by malice as its own internal corruption. Its reckoning was inevitable. That was why she'd put aside all her grievances. All except one.

"It would appear, Sion, that you have finally gotten a taste of failure."

Sion looked up at her, taken aback by her comment.

"This might come as a surprise to someone like you," she continued, "but we are all human. And humans will fail. No one lives perfectly. That is why we forgive, so that we may all have chances to make amends."

Especially me! she thought. *Make sure I get my chances!*

This was particularly important for her, because in the previous timeline she'd been afforded no such chance whatsoever. Now that the situation had calmed and she was thinking a little more clearly,

a thought popped into her head.

"Actually, now that I think about it... Hrm..." she mused with her arms crossed.

If what happened in Remno is the same as what happened in Tearmoon, then that whole holier-than-thou attitude Sion had going all the time wasn't really just justified, was it? In that light... Huh, you know what? That actually makes me a little angry.

As she obliquely regarded his apologetic expression, Evil Mia began whispering in her ear.

Now's the perfect time to teach him a lesson. Do it. It'll be fine. No pain, no gain, right? It's for his own good.

...She waited for the counterargument in her other ear, but none came. Good Mia, you see, was slacking off on the job. This is why Mia gets herself into trouble sometimes.

"Sion, I believe you need a permanent reminder of what transpired today so that you will never forget your failure."

"Huh? What do you mean?"

Mia paused for dramatic effect before continuing in a solemn voice.

"Crime and punishment go hand in hand; the former concludes only when the latter is received. Prince Abel may have forgiven you, but is that truly enough to satisfy your own conscience?"

"Punishment?" Keithwood jumped at the word. "Wait, Princess Mia! You—"

Sion hushed his flustered attendant with one outstretched arm.

"It's fine. You... are right, Princess Mia. I shall gladly accept my punishment. What will it be?"

"Mmhmhm, your courage is commendable. Stand over there then," directed Mia.

Sion did as he was told and closed his eyes. Mia proceeded to circle him slowly, walking with the pompous air of an imperial inspector. Finally, she positioned herself behind him and lowered herself into a stance. Just like how Abel had doggedly practiced that one single swing, Mia had been honing something of her own. Ever since the day she was told by Anne that it didn't hurt, she'd been determined to improve the amount of hurt she could deliver with her signature move — the kick!

Oh, you'd better get ready, because I'm going to make this hurt so much!

So determined was she to inflict pain on Sion that she was

willing to endure it in her own leg, and for a pain-phobe like Mia, that was saying something. She planted her feet and readied herself. Then she let it rip, kicking as high as she could. With the perfect arc of a pendulum, her leg swung toward Sion's head. Except it fell short of that... and his shoulders... and his waist... and just barely reached above his thighs.

In other words, she landed a direct hit on his butt! With a satisfying sound of impact to boot!

"Commit this pain to memory, Sion, and may it forever remind you of what transpired today!" she declared with a look of sublime triumph.

The pain Sion had been bracing for never came. Instead, he felt a slight bump on his rear. He turned and stared at Mia, baffled by the pathetically weak kick he'd just received.

"Um... What was—"

He stopped himself immediately.

Wait, that... had to be on purpose, right?

Crime and punishment went hand in hand. The former concluded only when the latter was received. The Great Sage of the Empire had posed him a question: "Is Abel's forgiveness enough for *you* to move on?" If crime concluded with punishment, then... where was his? That was why Mia had not spared him. To all onlookers, his punishment had now been carried out. There would be no more forthcoming. But it *hadn't* been. He knew, and he'd forever bear the weight of the knowledge that his dues were unpaid.

Therefore, his crime — and the guilt therewith — would linger, never to fade. Never again would he act in the name of justice without remembering his failure on this day. The pain of guilt would give him pause, forcing him to question himself. Over and over, he would need to ask if he was truly doing the right thing. And then, after finally overcoming the uncertainty and self-doubt, he would remember to forgive, just as he had once been forgiven. Faced with someone who had done wrong, the events of this day would serve as an eternal reminder of the need to show mercy and allow for the chance to make amends.

Commit this pain to memory, so that it may forever remind you of what transpired today, huh...

Judge fairly, and act justly... This had been said to him

countless times when he was young. Now, for the first time in his life, he understood. He finally felt on a visceral level the true weight of those words and the difficulty of living up to them.

Many years later, Sion Sol Sunkland — hailed as the Libra King for his wise prudence and deep mercy — would speak nostalgically to his loyal vassal Keithwood about the events that had transpired one fateful day.

“That day was my crossroads. The turning point of my life. Had I not experienced that agony, I would surely have incurred the hatred of my people and lost my head to their wrath. Had I experienced it later, I would have been too set in my ways to admit to my wrongs.”

Side Chapter: The Penal King and Mia's Loyal Subject

The Whitemoon Palace was an ornate castle that had housed generations of Tearmoon emperors. Even when the whole of the empire was engulfed in the fires of revolution, it stood strong, its beauty untainted by flame and soot. The revolutionary army had eventually occupied the palace, their leaders repurposing it as their headquarters. Once the battles ceased and the corrupt nobles were all killed, they planned to revert the extravagant structure to its original function as the administrative nucleus of the nation.

Ludwig stepped into the audience chamber. He lowered himself to one knee and bowed his head before the throne. Seated upon it was the young man who had summoned him.

"I am humbled by this gracious offer, Your Highness. As a former official of the empire, it is an honor and a privilege to continue serving the interests of its people. But... I implore you to grant me one request."

With hollow eyes, he looked up at the young man on the throne, who regarded him with bemusement through a few dangling strands of resplendent silver hair.

"A request, you say? Speak it, then. It is my intention to fulfill it to the best of my ability—"

"I have but one wish, Your Highness," said Ludwig, emotion creeping into his voice as he held Sion's gaze. "Spare her life. Please..."

A shadow fell across Sion's face.

"Unfortunately, the execution of Princess Mia is a closed matter. It cannot be revoked."

He shook his head, unmoved by Ludwig's plea. Then he let out a heavy sigh and continued.

"Too much..." he said, his voice losing some of its vigor. "Too much blood has been shed. The people are angry, Ludwig, angrier than ever at the tyranny of the imperial family and their ilk. If I call

off the execution, it will trigger outrage against the revolution's leadership."

The Kingdom of Sunkland could keep a certain degree of uproar in check through military pressure, but doing so would prolong the chaos and further exhaust the empire. Its people would only suffer more.

"It is imperative that order is brought to the chaos as soon as possible. To that end, the revolutionary army needs to be seen as a champion of justice that will redress the corrupt establishment. Therefore it needs to gain widespread support among the people."

A new leader that the people trusted would rise. Under this leader's direction, a new empire would rise from the ashes. That was the easiest script — the smoothest path toward recovery. It was correct. Its logic was sound. It was undeniably the fairest decision that could be made. And Ludwig knew it. He knew it far too well. That was why he sighed and stood up.

"I see... So be it."

He shook his head a little, turned, and walked away. It was a gesture of profound disrespect toward a foreign nation's royalty. The guard standing beside Sion almost drew his sword, but Sion motioned for him to stop. He raised his voice slightly and spoke in the direction of Ludwig's receding figure.

"Will you not lend me your strength? To rebuild the empire?"

"Prince Sion... You are an ideal ruler. You are wise. You are just. There is no doubt in my mind that you are a man of competence and virtue."

Unlike that pea-brained princess, he added in his mind.

The princess who, oblivious to the political significance of attending Saint-Noel Academy, spent her days there paying no attention to the diplomatic consequences of her actions... and as a result, earned the affection of not a single soul. Despite having attended school at the same time as the princess of a friendly nation, she'd forgotten the girl's name and, during a diplomatic meeting when the empire needed their help most, did the unthinkable — she looked her schoolmate in the face and asked, "My, who might you be?"

The incident had almost caused him to give up on the bungling princess for good. Instead, he'd swallowed his frustrations and stayed with her. But not before giving her a good scolding.

For the love of— Look, if you're going to that school, you have to at

least remember the names of the prominent students and their respective nations!

Try as he might, however, he couldn't stay angry. Especially not after he noticed the notepad she'd started carrying with her after his scathing admonishment. From time to time, he'd find her walking around with it in one hand muttering to herself, her face scrunched up in concentration. One time, he got close enough to catch a glimpse of what was written — the names of her classmates with their nations of origin, which she kept reciting to herself in an attempt to commit them to memory.

From that day on, something in him changed. He saw her differently. She was as foolish and unreliable as ever... but she was trying.

Her Highness... She put in the effort. She tried to do better.

He paused his steps and turned to study the young man on the throne. Prince Sion was the very picture of virtue. Mia was his enemy, and yet he had the forbearance to seek the assistance of Ludwig, her former vassal. He displayed sound judgment and political acuity.

Ludwig smiled. It was a sad, wry smile. He knew with painful clarity that he couldn't find a better person to serve. No one was more deserving of his devotion than the young man before him. And yet...

"Have you ever been wrong, Prince Sion? Even once? I doubt it. And that's why..."

He shook his head, leaving his final thoughts unsaid.

You'll probably never understand... how she felt... and how hard she tried...

Doing what is right when the right thing is doable — that was a valuable and laudable trait of a ruler. If given a sum of money they could freely spend, how many people could truly claim to know how to spend it correctly? Sion Sol Sunkland was, without question, the kind of person who would put that money to its best use. It was to his credit... but also to his fortune. There were plenty of times when the right thing could not be done — when the world backs one into a corner, placing them between a rock and a hard place. Even when one wishes to give food to the starving masses, there might be no food to give. The desire to rule with integrity and enrich one's people could be thwarted by the lack of resources or ability.

That was the story of his regent — a princess who struggled against her fate in the worst of times, when all the world seemed hellbent on bringing about her ruin. He sighed once more and said to Sion, “I cannot imagine you have any need for my strength. Surely, you have no shortage of capable advisors?”

He knew that was his sentimentalism talking. Effort and endeavor did not excuse the result. The cold truth was that countless people had lost their lives due to the incompetence of the imperial family and the tyranny of corrupt nobles. The bereaved were left with only empty spaces where their loved ones used to be. No mere words, no matter how sincere or logical, could bring back what they’d lost nor allay their anguish and fury.

But even so... in spite of it all, he felt a deep sorrow at the fact that everything she’d done — all her earnest efforts — would be in vain, never to be recognized.

“I... cannot see myself serving you or the Lady Tiona. Goodbye,” he said quietly, surprised at the hint of anger simmering in his voice.

Then he left.

Sion let him go without pause or penalty.

Two days later, in the Grand Square of the imperial capital, Mia Luna, Tearmoon Princess of the Tearmoon Empire was put to death. Thenceforth, Ludwig vanished from the stage of history, never to be seen again.

“I suppose this means Princess Mia was better regarded than I thought, at least by some...” Sion mused in his office after the execution.

The Mia Luna Tearmoon he knew was a selfish girl who abused her authority. She treated the lower nobles she disliked with open disdain and was transparently superficial in all matters. Violently uninteresting and shallow, she was the daughter of a foolish ruler who undermined his very empire through his disregard for his people. There was nothing about her that could coax even a shred of affection from him, but...

“Was there a side of her that... I didn’t see?”

The thought came with a brief vision of the Tearmoon Princess he used to know. They’d gone to the same school. They’d spoken to each other. And at his command, he’d just watched her head part

from her body. It was not a good feeling, and it left an ugly feeling in his chest — not simple sentimentality, but something far more bitter.

As time went on, the fall of the Tearmoon Empire proved to be the beginning of a period of chaos for the continent. First, the assassination of Rafina threw the Holy Principality of Belluga into disarray. Next, revolution consumed the Kingdom of Remno. The wave of mayhem grew and grew until it swept over even the Kingdom of Sunkland. Faced with numerous wars and internal power struggles, King Sion's circle of capable vassals rallied around him, and they managed to steer Sunkland through the chaos.

It cost them a good chunk of their territory and the lives of many, many people, but even so, their losses were minimal compared to those of other nations. It was an inarguable display of strong leadership and good government. However, such troubled times proved toxic for ideals, and Sion soon found that a kingdom could not subsist on morals alone. Time and again, he was forced to make hard choices. On those moonless nights when he felt trapped between conscience and reality, he would without fail recall that fateful day, when the sun bled crimson and the guillotine blade fell.

I... wasn't wrong. I had *to. There was no other choice.*

He would repeat those words to himself, scratching the scab off an old wound that would never heal. He'd try to ignore it. Pretended it was gone. But it stayed with him, forcing him to endure its persistent itch and ache.

In his later years, Sion Sol Sunkland — the Penal King — had earned the reputation of a righteous ruler, but he would lie on his deathbed alone. That was his life — one of respect but little love, in which his name evoked in his people not the respect of affection and favor, but that of fear and awe.

Thus concluded his story in a future yet to come. It was a possibility — one ending amongst many — that Mia launched into the great beyond with a feeble but completely life-altering kick.

Chapter 42: A Kindhearted Conviction

"U-Um... Sion?"

Seeing his lingering expression of agony, Mia got a little worried. Maybe all that kicking practice had paid off a little *too* well.

"Mia, you have my gratitude. Once again, I'm reminded that you truly are the Great Sage of the Empire."

Still grimacing, Sion lowered his head and thanked her in earnest tones. It sent a chill up her spine, and she took a step back.

D-Did this guy just thank me for kicking him? Wh-What in the moons? Is he one of them*? Those people like Tiona's father who feel happy when they're hurt?*

"Your words have awakened in me something that would surely have lain dormant otherwise."

Eeek! A-Awakened? Awakened what?! And what do you mean I'm truly the Great Sage? You don't have to be smart to... Oh sweet moons, is it about the strength of the kick? Or the angle?! Did he take a liking to how I kick?! What if he starts asking me to kick him again and again?!

She put on a forced smile. Her cheek twitched a few times.

"W-Well then, isn't that just wonderful? Good for you."

To her bewilderment, he burst into a bright smile, as though her words had eased some great burden. She slowly averted her gaze, trying very hard not to make any further eye contact. It occurred to her that she might have just made an irreparable mistake, but she threw it into the closet of her mind. The less she thought about it, the better.

"B-By the way, about this chancellor fellow. Dasayev, was it? Have you figured out where he is?"

She quickly changed the topic. Leaving problems for later was her modus operandi.

"Ah, yes... Keithwood, care to explain?" said Sion.

Keithwood nodded.

"According to our information, Lord Donovan is being held captive right under our noses," he said, gesturing at the town

around them. “He’s somewhere here in Senia.”

“What?!” Mia’s eyes went wide with shock.

“Prince Abel, are you familiar with this town?”

Abel shook his head at Keithwood’s question. “No, but some of the soldiers might be. Let me ask...”

Just then, a thought occurred to Mia.

“Oh, wouldn’t it be better to ask Lynsha?”

You think you can make me do all the hard work while you watch from the sidelines? Think again, you silly girl, thought Mia.

A mischievous grin crept across her lips.

For a moment, Abel was mesmerized by Mia’s radiant smile. It took an effort of will for him to look away, after which he coughed awkwardly and refocused on the issue at hand.

“Lynsha? Who’s that?”

“The sister of the rebel army’s leader. I’ve become quite acquainted with her, as a matter of fact.”

Abel drew in a breath of pure awe.

“I see... You did, huh...”

At that, Abel felt like he already knew what Mia was trying to do.

She’s... hoping to lighten their eventual sentence?

He thought back to what Mia had said before: everyone makes mistakes, so people should be given the chance to make amends. Though they’d been coerced by foreign spies, those who joined the rebel army couldn’t go unpunished. The central figures especially would face severe consequences. Under the current circumstances, it was likely to be the death penalty. However, if stripped of their rebel title, these people were little more than common people who felt overburdened by heavy taxes.

Mia, who understood that the monarchy was partially accountable for their unrest, probably felt sympathetic toward their plight. Hoping to lessen their punishment as much as possible, she was likely giving them a chance to redeem themselves. If they contributed to resolving this conflict, when it came time for the trial, they’d be able to present themselves in a more favorable light.

If they said that they’d been tricked by Sunkland’s spies, but had a change of heart halfway through and helped the Remno army thwart the sinister plot... Knowing my father, they might actually convince him.

He knew that the King of Remno was a straightforward man. If

Mia were to speak on their behalf as the Princess of Tearmoon, it would improve their chances even further.

Either way, she's definitely thinking many moves ahead.

Abel was awestruck by her foresight. Hidden within the awe, however, was something more tender — a comforting warmth from the knowledge that when dealing with those who erred, her profound wisdom was tempered by a deep sympathy for their plight. He was glad that she thought this way, even if at a glance, this facet of her character ill befit her status as a ruler. It was, ostensibly, a sentiment more than a little naive. Nevertheless, it endeared her to him more than ever, because he knew that Mia's compassion was always founded on a bedrock of sound pragmatism.

Since the girl Lynsha lived around here, she would be familiar with the local geography. Being connected to the rebel army, she might have knowledge of potential hiding places as well. It made sense to have her act as their guide.

Then there was the matter of the aftermath. The revolutionaries were technically representing the people, and putting their leader to death would cause no small amount of tension. At the very least, it would give factions opposed to the king plenty of fodder for political attacks, but for the kingdom to maintain any semblance of order, an incident like this needed to incur severe punishment. However, penalty without just cause would send a muddled message to the public and deal a blow to the legitimacy of the current regime.

The key words were, of course, "without just cause." That was the driving force behind Mia's actions. She was trying to give them the grounds to make acquittal more palatable for the powerful, if not obligatory. To do so, she would have to stitch together a complicated web of logical arguments and legal principles, but at the core of it all was a kindhearted conviction.

Mia, you are truly extraordinary... I might be reaching for the moon right now, but one day...

Fortunately for him, the day he came to realize the true nature of Mia's kindhearted conviction was unlikely to ever arrive.

"Speaking of information, though... These Sunkland spies of yours — What were they called? Wind Crows? — They sure infiltrated pretty far into our royal family," Abel said in a thoughtful tone. "I wonder who they are..."

“As a matter of fact, the one who sent this information was a maid who goes by the name of Monica Buendia.”

“Wha— Milord?! That’s—” A startled Keithwood tried to stop Sion from saying more, but the prince shook his head.

“It’s fine. It doesn’t matter if they know. I intend to advise Father to have all Wind Crows recalled.”

That left Keithwood with little more to say. A full scale withdrawal of the Wind Crows was likely to happen even without Sion’s proposal. Neither kingdom wished to fight a war at the moment. Remno lacked the strength, and Sunkland dreaded the optics. Consequently, meetings would likely be conducted behind closed doors, in which the issue would be settled through some other method such as monetary compensation. It was easy to imagine that the first demand from Remno would be the complete elimination of Sunkland’s spy network within their borders, starting with the expulsion of all Wind Crow agents. As for those directly involved with the conspiracy... Diplomatic deliberations would ultimately decide their fate.

“Besides, knowing Prince Abel, I doubt he’ll do anything to her.” Sion looked at Abel. “Am I correct in my assumption?”

“Yes, you can trust me on that much. Still, Monica, huh... So it was her...”

Abel recalled the face of the maid he’d seen just the other day.

I’m no Princess Mia, but the thought that she might face severe penalties doesn’t sit well with me either. Which means...

With a hesitant grimace, he turned to Mia.

“Princess Mia, could I perhaps ask that man to accompany us? I believe he’s one of your subjects.”

“...Eh? Dion?”

Seeing that she was giving him a blank look, he scratched his head and explained.

“Normally, this would be Bernardo’s job, but he’s not exactly known for his flexible thinking. For now, I’d rather not tell him that Sunkland’s involved in all this.”

“Ah, I see. Well... I guess he probably won’t say no...” she said, her expression turning dour as she looked in his direction.

With slow and clearly reluctant steps, she approached Dion.

“Well, I mean, since Your Highness seems to have every intention of going, I sort of have to follow along as well, don’t I?” He shrugged and shook his head like he was dealing with a

particularly demanding child.

Wait a minute... Oh, I see what's happening here. Everybody is expecting me to go too, aren't they? Of course they are. When haven't they? In fact, I'm starting to see a pattern here...

With a put-upon sigh, she accepted her fate like the provident sage she supposedly was.

In the end, the squad that set out to rescue Donovan was comprised of six people: Sion, Abel, Keithwood, Dion, Mia, and Anne. Ludwig went to speak to Lambert and negotiate the immediate dissolution of the rebel army upon Count Donovan's safe return. Tiona, who could handle a sword to some degree, went with him as a safeguard. The idea of having both princes charge into the fray met with some resistance, but the lack of other viable individuals ultimately decided the issue. Lambert's Blue Scarves weren't going to let them bring a bunch of soldiers from the Remno army. Conversely, the revolutionaries were neither competent nor trustworthy enough to be a wise option for escort. Mia's group was, therefore, the best given the circumstances.

Honestly, just me would have been enough... But anyway. If things get ugly, I'll just make sure I get the princess and her maid out of there. As for her princely sweetheart... Eh, he'll have to cover his own ass, thought Dion.

According to the information from Monica, the confinement area was loosely guarded. Jem had only a few combat-trained Wind Crow agents accompanying him. Normally, Dion would be disgusted by these numbers — they'd need three times the opponents to make the fight interesting — but considering the princess was with him, he decided to tone down his usual bravado and proceed a little more cautiously.

"So, the fighting doesn't really concern me, but just between us... are you really expecting this to work out?" he'd asked Ludwig before they parted ways.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, if you want me to just go in and butcher everyone I see, then I totally understand, but if you're expecting to have the Chancellor back safe and sound... Gotta admit, I can't really see why they'd keep him alive for this long."

Dasayev Donovan was nothing more than an instrument to trigger the popular revolt. Once he'd served his purpose, there was

little merit to letting him live.

"I see your point," answered Ludwig. "I, however, believe otherwise."

Dion cocked an eyebrow.

"Oh yeah? How come?"

"This is something I was told by Her Highness... but apparently, the leader of the revolutionaries is a man who is, to quote her, 'a good talker but seems sort of shallow.'"

At first, the answer made Dion frown, but comprehension quickly seeped into his expression.

"Aha, so that's it... Yeah, I guess there is a reason for them to leave him alive. Anyway, I'll just be casually defending the princess with my life, so you guys make sure you keep these revolutionaries off our backs, okay?" he said, waving his hand flippantly as he strolled off.

Chapter 43: Incoming! (Princess Mia, That Is)

In downtown Senia, where the wealthier folks resided, there was a large and well-furnished manor once occupied by an affluent merchant. Dasayev Donovan was being held in its basement. All things considered, he was being treated fairly well; his captors had afforded him some comforts given his advanced age. Granted, no matter how well he was treated, he'd still rather be free.

"So, have you decided you want to cooperate with us yet?" asked a glib-looking man as he walked into the room.

Dasayev shot him a stern glare before silently shaking his head.

"Seriously? I don't get you, old man. It's not like you've got any family. If you really care about the masses, isn't now the time for you to take a stand?"

"I do not believe His Majesty has made an irreparable mistake. So long as I have concerns, I will continue to voice them, but *voicing* them will be all that I do. Regicide will only intensify the chaos and worsen the people's suffering."

"Why don't you take the throne yourself then? You know what needs to be done. Ain't it faster to do it yourself? Come on, you can't tell me the thought has never crossed your mind."

To stand at the top of a nation was something that all nobles and politicians had dreamt of at one time or another. Dasayev's reply, however, was a curt shake of the head.

"Enough. Do you expect me to heed your words when you have not even given me your name?"

"Eh? Didn't I? I'm pretty sure I told you back when we first met. I'm—"

"Jem. I know."

It was the most common name in this area. So prevalent was its usage that people who didn't introduce themselves were referred to as "Nameless Jems." Dasayev highly doubted this was the man's real name.

“Begone. Your courtship is futile. I am too old to be wooed by tall dark strangers.”

“All right, whatever you say,” Jem said with an indifferent shrug before his voice grew darker. “But let me be clear. Even my patience has its limit.”

Then he walked out of the room.

“Argh! Cursed geezer, he’s really starting to get on my nerves...” Jem snarled as he walked out into the hallway. “I’d have killed him five times over if it wasn’t for... Ugh, that Graham bastard, he needs to hurry up and find the right person...”

With the combat training he’d received as a Wind Crow it would have been trivially easy to kill Donovan, and that had indeed been the original plan, but there had been a change in circumstances. The problem was that, unlike his counterpart in Tearmoon, Dasayev Donovan did not have a Tiona equivalent. He had no children, and his wife had passed away long ago. His surviving relatives were all old and faithfully subordinate to the King, and none of them would ever consider rebellion. There was no one who could take real advantage of the pretext of revenge that would come of Donovan’s death. They were missing the next link in the chain.

Lambert was undeniably a natural orator. After some instruction from Jem, he was even displaying some competence in cold reading. Such tricks, however, were ultimately child’s play. Stirring up emotions in people was a fundamentally trivial task. One need know only what the other party wants to hear, and then push them in the desired direction. A string of pleasing words — music to their ears — mixed with a few poisonous chords was enough. He had manipulated many people with this method, ranging from Remno’s underground revolutionaries... to Sunkland’s Wind Crows. But it still wasn’t enough. In order for the revolution to succeed, there needed to be a single target for the rioters’ zeal to focus on.

“Had everything gone according to plan, it’d be time to start inciting chaos in the empire now. That meddling wench...”

It was all the fault of the Great Sage of the Empire. Because of her, they were completely underprepared and critically short on time, and he’d been forced to rewrite the script. The new plan was supposed to start with Lambert’s revolutionary army rescuing

Dasayev Donovan. The chancellor would then join their cause, and together they would lead the revolting masses in a series of insurgent events while simultaneously denouncing the monarchy for its sins. That was why he'd been holding Donovan here in Senia, he'd figured that if he managed to convince the old man he could still salvage his original scenario.

"And then there's that *idiot*..."

He'd wanted to wait until he converted Donovan to their side before beginning the revolts, but Lambert had gone and kicked off an uprising on his own. Though the young upstart's knack for persuasive speech and manipulation were normally a boon, those traits would become a serious nuisance if he started going off half-cocked.

"It looks like I chose the wrong person for the job after all. I was only intending to hold onto him as a backup, but... I have to say, it sure ain't fun being pressed for time," he said with a twisted grin as he pulled a book out of his pocket. It had a jet black cover and exuded an eerie air. "The Great Sage of the Empire, Mia Luna Tearmoon... I hear she's a friend of Rafina Orca Belluga. It'd better not be *that* woman pulling the strings..."

He muttered bitterly to himself as he ran his finger along the book's cover. As he did, a faint mark appeared on the surface, its shape uncannily serpentine.

"The empire's collapse tips the first domino in a cascading ripple that will topple nation after nation until all have fallen... and the destruction of order gives rise to chaos. That is our life's goal, as well as our dying wish... And I will *not* allow it to be thwarted."

He continued contemplating how to persuade Dasayev Donovan as he disappeared down the corridor. Little did he know that a great collapse was indeed imminent, only it would not be that of nations... but his plan. And it would take the form of a young girl.

The countdown had begun. Mia was incoming.

As Mia had expected, Lynsha knew where the manor in question was located.

"I think the place used to belong to a merchant or something, but I don't remember the revolutionaries ever using it..."

Her statement made it seem more likely than ever that the manor was the building they were looking for. The fact that the revolutionaries had heard no mention of it could, in a way, be taken

as proof of its significance; a mob of amateurs would not be trusted with such important information.

After being filled in by Mia, Lynsha quickly agreed to lead the way for them. As they prepared to leave, however, Mia was surprised to discover a pensive Lynsha staring at her.

"Is there something on my face?" she asked, puzzled.

"Oh, um, no... It's just that... I never thought you'd actually try to stop this conflict. I mean, you look like..."

"I look like what?"

Mia gave her head a quizzical tilt.

"...Never mind. Let's go."

"Is it just me or was she about to say something terribly rude?" muttered Mia as Lynsha walked off.

Mia, in fact, was pretty sure she did mind, but she dwelled on it for only a moment before she had to hurry to catch up to the ever-receding figure of her guide.

A hushed silence had fallen over Senia. But for the occasional scurrying passerby, its streets were completely deserted.

"Well, that's not good," Keithwood grumbled as he looked around. "With the place this empty, every damn pair of eyes is going to be on us."

"There's not much we can do about that. Nobody wants to get dragged into a needless conflict," Lynsha said with a shrug before turning into a narrow alley. She rounded a few more corners before exclaiming, "There!"

The group looked where she was pointing and saw a large manor situated on an even larger yard. Unfortunately, there were no trees or shrubbery big enough to offer them cover.

"What should we do?" Lynsha asked. "We can wait until it's dark, but..."

As though on cue, their surroundings began to dim, prompting Mia to look up at the sky. Her eyes grew distant.

"My, how fast the day went. It's already..." she said in a soft, pensive voice, as though the words had simply slipped from her lips.

Dusk had crept up on them, and the horizon had begun to burn red. The sun, just like that fateful day... had begun to bleed. Voices echoed in her ears. Images swam before her eyes. Once again, she was walking up those steps, her heart withering under the hate-

filled gazes of her people. The loneliness returned.

I... don't like this place. Something about it is... just terrible.

Whoever was responsible for the pain she'd suffered, they were in that building. The thought made the hair on the back of her neck stand up. She rubbed her arms, but she couldn't seem to remove the invisible layer of frost that had settled on her skin.

"Are you scared, Mia?"

"Eh?"

She turned reflexively, and her eyes met Abel's. He studied her with an expression of sober concern.

"Oh, Abel, it's you... No, I'm fine."

She shook her head. It wasn't fear. It was just that... the scene felt familiar, and it reminded her of her past. It was all in her head; she just had to put it out of her mind. Her reply, however, did not dissuade Abel, who held her gaze and gently placed his hand on hers.

"...Hm?"

It took a second for the sudden gesture to register, but when it did, she flinched so hard her feet almost left the ground.

"Huh?! Wh-Wh-Wha—"

Whatever it was that had been gripping her heart — past shades or future specters — they were gone now, the dread they embodied shattered into a million fading fragments that vanished in the breeze. The warmth he radiated and the tender sensation of her hand enveloped in his brought forth an enchanted sign from her lips.

"Sorry," he said, looking away. "My, um, mother... She used to hold my hand like this, and it helped me relax, so..."

The tip of his nose glowed a faint shade of pink, and he spoke with the tone of someone trying to explain away a particularly embarrassing moment.

"O-Oh, um, I see," answered Mia, her whole face flushed with color. "I... very much appreciate your consideration, Abel."

Clearly overwhelmed, her voice cracked a little and she spoke with what could charitably be called an unconventional use of vibrato. To put things into context — in case anyone was losing sight of the situation — all they did was hold hands. That was it. For all her boasting, when put on the spot, Mia was fundamentally still an innocent young maiden.

"Hey, you two, is something wrong?" shouted Sion, who was

ahead of them.

H-Hey! Things were just getting good, too! she mentally grumbled, pointedly ignoring what felt suspiciously like a wave of relief washing over her. After all, actual romance was way out of her comfort zone, and her chicken heart was soon squawking up a storm. All this... from what was more or less an affectionate handshake.

"I get that this is all very necessary to keep the empire going, but please, my dear princess. Time and place. We're in *public*," quipped Dion before he cracked a grin. "Besides, isn't it too early to be making heirs?"

"Wh-What?! W-We just held hands! You can't make babies by holding hands! P-Probably..."

For what was a biological impossibility, Mia didn't sound very confident. Instead, Anne stepped in front her, as though shielding her from Dion's teasing.

"Sir Dion, please refrain from amusing yourself at Her Highness's expense."

"Hahaha, between Ludwig and you, it's like the princess has a pair of overprotective nannies."

Mia glared at Dion, who didn't appear the least bit repentant. Her expression, however, soon softened. She looked back to the sky, then at her companions. It was the same ominous sunset, the same crimson sky... but she wasn't alone. And that made all the difference.

She had Abel. She had Sion. She had Keithwood and Dion. She had her loyal subjects — Anne near and Ludwig afar — and she even had an ex-archnemesis in Tiona. They were there for her. So, she took a deep breath and nodded.

It's okay. We can do this. I know we can.

Lynsha alone wore an exasperated expression as she regarded the merry band she'd brought with her.

"Hey, are any of you going to, oh, I don't know... hide or something?"

"My name is Sion Sol Sunkland, and I am speaking to all those currently inside this manor! You are to drop your weapons and present yourselves at once! The White Crows' plot has been exposed! You have no more reason to fight!" Sion shouted at the looming structure.

And with that, "covert" went out the window. Lynsha pressed a

palm to her face. Even Mia hadn't expected him to announce their arrival, just like that.

A-Are we really going to be okay like this?

Feeling a growing sense of uncertainty, she gave Dion an inquiring look, who shrugged indifferently in response.

"Hard to say if any of them'll actually do as he said, but it'll probably plant some doubt in their minds."

He drew his sword and rested it on his shoulder.

"Right then, fellow companions whose lives are all worth a hell of a lot more than mine, for your safety, please refrain from placing yourselves in front of me. It makes it difficult for me to protect you when I have to chop through you to get to my opponents."

They decided to split into two groups. The first, composed of Sion, Dion, Abel, Anne, and Mia, would enter the manor from the front. Needless to say, while Anne might still make herself useful in some way, Mia was just inflating the headcount. Meanwhile, Lynsha and Keithwood would sneak in through the back.

"Let's get this party started."

Dion's sword flashed in an arc, and he stepped through the now-defunct door. Finding the interior exceedingly dim, he opened the eye he'd kept closed and scanned the surroundings. It was a trick he used to maintain vision when entering a dark place, and it *worked*.

Claaaank!

The sound of a metallic impact came a split second after. A blade shot out of a dark corner behind him, and he caught it with his own before smirking.

"Surprise attack, huh?"

It had been perfect, launched from his blind side under the cover of darkness. Nonetheless, it failed to have its intended effect. He didn't even flinch. Instead, he shrugged.

"I swear, you spies can be such wannabe assassins sometimes... What? Did you think I'd have trouble swinging a sword around in a small space? Or that you'd get me before my eyes could adjust to the darkness?" He tsk-tsked his assailant with a finger wag. "Points for effort, I guess, but such a wimpy thrust! I could have stopped it with my eyes closed. Very disappointing. I blame the Adamantine Spear for getting my hopes up."

He wrapped his fingers around the offending arm and *squeezed*.

There was a crunching sound, and the man's face twisted with pain. Dion leaned in, bringing their faces so close that they almost touched, and flashed him a smile with plenty of teeth.

"By the way, I should mention that Prince Sion is with us. Just in case you, you know, somehow didn't hear him when he was shouting his lungs out at you."

The man's eyes darted to the door just as Sion stepped in, and recognition flickered in his pupils. Dion smiled and spoke in a tone that was almost gentle.

"Look, this whole scheme thing you white squawkers have got going? It's pretty much totally out in the open now, so you might wanna reconsider if it's really worth giving your life for," he said before driving his foot into the man's gut, causing him to crumple to the ground. He stomped on his arm and pointed his sword at the man's nose before snarling, "Of course, if you'd prefer to be a martyr, then I'd be more than happy to oblige you."

Then he retracted his vicious attitude and lazily slung his sword back over his shoulder.

"Just surrender, okay? And tell all your buddies to do so too. I'd rather avoid unnecessary bloodshed."

"My, what a surprise, Captain Dion," said Mia. "I thought you loved fighting."

"Come on, princess. Even I have standards. I like fighting, not bullying. The skill gap can only get so big before it becomes sadistic. Bring me another guy like that Adamantine Spear though, and I'll happily go another dozen rounds with him," he answered before glancing at his grounded assailant with brutal disdain.

That one look was enough to shatter the last vestiges of the man's resolve. Their own prince stood opposed to their cause, and they faced a warrior far too strong for them to handle. Each hurdle was high enough in its own right, but combined, they presented an insurmountable wall. After surrendering, the man was instructed to light all the lamps in the manor, which he promptly did. Sion, illuminated in all his princely glory, scanned the room, into which men were slowly trickling, their hands up and weapons discarded.

Mia breathed a sigh of relief.

Well, it looks like things will actually work out after all.

Anne, who was similarly soothed by the dissipating tension, found herself sufficiently composed to give Mia the good old maid once-over.

“Milady, your hair seems to have lost some of its luster...” she said with a concerned sigh.

“Ah, you noticed? It’s actually because the shampoo I’ve been using is rather unimpressive. The one I got from Abel felt a little more moisturizing.”

“Fear not, milady!” said Anne as she reached into an inner pocket and dug around for a bit before producing a small bottle. “See? I made sure to bring some for you.”

“My! How terribly thoughtful of you, Anne! What would I do without you?”

Mia took the bottle from Anne, held it up like a trophy, and broke out into a delighted sequence of skips and twirls. Then she committed the unspeakable...

“When this battle is over, I’m going to soak in a bath to my heart’s content!”

In war, the last thing you should ever talk about is what you’re going to do when it’s over. So cosmic karma did its thing.

“Oh, I can already imagine how wonderful it’s going to— Eh?”

Her last twirl didn’t seem to end. Where firm ground should have been to catch her landing, she found nothing but the gaping maw of an unilluminated stairway.

“Gyaaaaaaaaaah!”

She tumbled down the stairs into the dark underground. The world turned into a dizzying spiral. She fell and fell until a hard thud — along with the *crack* of something fragile being shattered — signaled the end of her descent.

“U-Ughhh... I feel so sick,” she muttered as she tried to regain her bearings.

Suddenly, she noticed the presence of another person.

“Well, well, if it isn’t Her Highness Princess Mia. It’s an honor to be graced by your presence.”

The man who went by the name of Jem was looking down at her with a wide, wolfish grin.

Chapter 44: The Miracle of the Horse Shampoo (With Regard to Its Coefficient of Friction)

"Wh-Who are you?"

"Hahaha, I hardly have the audacity to sully the ears of the Great Sage of the Empire with the name of one so lowly as myself," he said with a mockingly exaggerated bow of respect, his teeth visible behind his wicked smile.

"Mia! Are you okay?!"

The two princes rushed down the stairs, Anne and Dion right on their heels.

"Are you Jem?"

Sion's dagger-eyed stare did not shake the man, who cocked a curious eyebrow at him.

"Judging by the fact that you know my name, I assume you're already aware of the White Crows' plan."

"That's right. Your scheme has been laid bare," said Sion, drawing his sword. "Your friends have all surrendered. I suggest you follow their example."

"Friends, huh..." Jem scoffed at the word and shook his head. "Speaking of which, that reminds me of Graham. I almost pity him, the miserable bastard. A man whose loyalty to his kingdom proved too spicy for the delicate palate of his young, fastidious prince."

Suddenly, they heard a new voice from even further down the underground passage.

"Give it up, man. It's over. Dasayev Donovan is safe. You're the only one left."

Keithwood appeared from the shadows beyond with characteristic nonchalance. Jem, now trapped in the middle, tsked.

"Aw, come on. You even found the secret underground escape route? Prince Sion's one thing, but it looks like even his attendant's reputation is well-earned."

Sion was blocking the stairs. Waiting farther down the passage

was Keithwood. Standing between them was Jem. And in the midst of it all, trying her best to sneak away unnoticed, was Mia.

Th-This is my chance. I need to get out of here...

With slow, inconspicuous movements, she turned and began shuffling away, only to feel something cold and metallic at her neck.

“Eek!”

She gasped and straightened, the motion almost lifting her off the ground. The sensation of an unsheathed sword on her skin summoned a flood of memories that ended with the heavy, heartless weight of a falling blade.

“Don’t get smart on me now. It doesn’t take much to cut through that slim little neck of yours.”

Mia nodded with sycophantic zeal, stammering out a string of babble meant to convey obedience before a menacing grunt from Jem caused her to shut up for good. She stood completely still, daring only to blink her eyes every few seconds.

“Don’t do anything stupid,” warned Sion. “Sunkland won’t back the Wind Crows, white or black. Your scheme has already failed. It’s over.”

“Whoa, whoa, so harsh, Your Highness. All those hurtful words from you might just cause my hand to slip. You wouldn’t want any princess heads to roll, now would you?” Jem tapped his sword on Mia’s shoulder to illustrate his point. “I’ve got a lot of pent-up stress from having my plans ruined by this little girl, after all. You might not want to push my buttons.”

Mia whimpered and tried to lean away from the blade, but she went a bit too far and almost lost her balance. When she put a foot out to steady herself it landed with a conspicuous splash, followed by the unmistakable sound of liquid steadily dripping into a puddle. Jem stared down at her for a second. Then his lips curled up into a profoundly mocking grin.

“Heh. At the end of the day, the Great Sage of the Empire is still just a kid. Pathetic.”

Every last pair of eyes was now focused on Mia — specifically, her skirt, which was wet. There was no doubt in any of their minds that, tragically, she’d soiled herself in her terror.

Any of their minds... except Anne’s! Mia’s first and most faithful subject immediately figured out what had happened.

No! This smell, it’s...

A floral fragrance tickled her nose — one that was surprisingly familiar, as it frequently drifted from her dear mistress’s hair.

“*The one I got from Abel felt a little more moisturizing*,” she

recalled Mia saying.

That particular shampoo, containing what must be a more oleaginous blend of ingredients, had an oilier texture than most others. The logical corollary of this fact was, of course...

"Milady! Run!"

Anne's sudden cry pierced the silence like a clap of thunder. Everyone froze. Everyone except Mia, whose unshakable trust in her confidante caused her muscles to move on reflex. Time slowed to a crawl as Mia, the sole human actor on a stage of wooden mannequins, shifted her weight onto one leg as she readied herself to dash. Then the pause ended, and everything sped back up.

"Little wench!"

Jem reacted first. Seeing that Mia was trying to escape, he raised his sword and, his rage and hatred for the Great Sage of the Empire flaring in his eyes, put all his malice into a vicious horizontal swing at her neck. Should the blade find its mark, it would surely rend her delicate skin, sever her slender muscle, and slice straight through her spine, only...

Shhhhhlick!

As Mia pushed down with her leg in an attempt to bolt, her foot slammed into the ground and... kept going. It had met with surprisingly little resistance, and the excess momentum caused the entire leg to be flung out behind her.

"Eeek!"

The sudden motion produced by her shampoo-soaked shoes was beyond the ability of even a trained fighter to predict. Her legs flew out from under her as her body lurched forward. Something swished sharply by, mere inches from her head .

"Gyah!"

She fell in a rather unflattering fashion with a loud yelp, but no one faulted her for it.

"You little— Gah! Die!"

Jem dove toward her, sword primed to thrust, but he too stepped in the puddle of shampoo and suffered its wrath. It launched his leg forward, causing the rest of him to topple backwards. His sword landed on the ground out of his reach.

"Milady! This way! Hurry!"

"Eeeek! Eeeeeeek!"

A wild mass of screams and flailing limbs, Mia struggled desperately to get back on her feet and reach Anne, only to slip

once again. Her back leg flew upward in an arc. Standing behind her was Jem, back on his feet and dashing at her with his arm outstretched.

"Damn kid, wait till I get my hands on yo— Urk?!"

It was the most unfortunate of coincidences, caused by two people in the wrong place at the wrong time. Mia's heel, which was on an upward trajectory, just so happened to be at the exact height to make contact with Jem's b— No, for the sake of propriety, the exact spot shall remain unmentioned. Suffice to say, though, she'd kicked him in a place where he really felt it.

"Hnnnnnnnnngh!"

With a long, agonized groan, Jem fell to his knees, both hands grasping spasmodically at the location of impact. Dion walked over, his sword drawn but ultimately unneeded.

"Huh... You know, the last thing I would have expected is for the princess to finish you off herself," he said with a drolly raised eyebrow.

Thus fell one of the incident's main conspirators, Jem, to the brilliant footwork of the Great Sage of the Empire, Mia Luna Tearmoon, who shattered his elaborate scheme — and maybe more — with one brutally well-placed kick.

Chapter 45: To Keep Unwithered That Which Was Nurtured With Care

"Ugh, damn it all..."

Lined up before Mia and her friends were the tightly-bound forms of the White Crow members, though it was likely that the only one for whom the rope was necessary was Jem, who continued to glare with hateful defiance at them. Mia regarded him silently for some time before turning to Abel.

"Abel... and Sion too. I have a request. Could you... spare the lives of these people?"

Abel was hardly surprised to hear her plea. If anything, he was almost expecting it.

I had a feeling that's what she'd ask for.

The White Crows had conspired to overthrow an entire monarchy. Unlike the rest of the Wind Crows, who limited their activities to gathering intelligence, these radicals had mounted a direct attack. Sentencing them to death would be an act of mercy. Were they not foreign actors, all their family and kin might very well be killed as punishment.

Despite this, Mia pleaded for their lives. Under normal circumstances, there was no way he could grant her request. It should be impossible, and yet... he couldn't help but ponder.

If it was the Princess of Tearmoon who asked, might Father listen?

He was aware that the King of Remno had a soft spot for girls who asked him for things.

As for the intelligence agents... It'll take some convincing, but the best concession I can wrangle out of him will probably be immediate banishment from the kingdom. In fact, the bigger problem is the locals who got involved in the revolutionary activities. The ones who just got caught up in the fever might get away with a good lashing, but there's no way Lynsha and Lambert will come out of this in one piece...

He glanced at Mia, wondering what she thought about the siblings' circumstances. He wasn't sure what could be done, but he

didn't feel particularly concerned either. Mia, he knew, had undoubtedly considered such issues already.

Sion was of the same opinion. Having recently been lectured by Mia, he saw this as an extension of her ideals. She was trying to give these people a chance to make amends — to redeem themselves. Her actions thus far, in fact, were clear proof of this intention. Had the White Crows' actions led to a bloody melee that claimed the lives of countless victims, it would be impossible to spare the lives of any of these people. Furthermore, tensions would have flared between Remno and Sunkland, and war would be inevitable. Once it reached that point, there would be no turning back.

But it didn't. There was only limited damage done, and the fallout should be minimal. At the very least, it shouldn't be bad enough to push Remno to declare war on an opponent the size of Sunkland. It would depend on how negotiations went, but they'd probably managed to, albeit barely, keep the pot from boiling over. Mia's request could be the final course of this long, harrowing meal, the culmination of all her efforts.

I have no choice... There's nothing I can do... These are words befitting only the lips of those who'd made every attempt to effect change.

Mia made those attempts. She did her utmost. Then...

It's up to me to utilize every resource within my power to see her words turned into actions.

As a fellow beneficiary of her redemptive mercy, it was the very least he could do, but in order to accomplish that he would have to juggle a whole lot of very fragile interests.

Assuming Remno settles for the more lenient penalty of banishment, Sunkland would find it difficult to put them to death for fear of the optics; it would reek of a cover-up. If Prince Abel handles the persuading in Remno, the question is how I should deal with the Wind Crows upon their return...

"Hah, did I just hear you say you're not going to execute us? Am I losing my mind or are you all losing yours? Or what? Are you planning to torture us or something?" Jem let out a wailing bout of laughter. "Go ahead. Do your worst. You won't get a word out of me."

Sion scowled. Something about the man's shrill, disdainful

voice grated on his nerves.

Torture, huh... I see the princess thinks he's still hiding something from us.

Dion alone was thinking in a completely different direction. Having been briefed on certain topics before coming here, he had a unique take on the situation. Something about the Wind Crows didn't sit right with him — specifically, their change into White Crows. What was once a passive agency had morphed into a considerably more aggressive one, and the man behind this metamorphosis was right there in front of him.

This Jem guy... There's definitely something fishy about him.

He didn't seem to fear torture. In fact, he'd dared them to do their worst. This wouldn't be a very surprising stance if they were dealing with someone who'd sworn his loyalty to his nation. Spies, in particular, had to have a firm compass of allegiance in their hearts. What Dion heard in Jem's voice, however, wasn't mere loyalty. It was something else. If he had to put it into words, it would be...

Fanaticism. The kind of mad passion only true believers of some greater cause can muster.

He glanced at Mia, forming his own hypothesis. Why was she asking for these men to be spared? It had to be because she'd sniffed out the toxin under the rot. The Wind Crows had gone rogue, but they hadn't done so alone. There was intent behind their corruption; a hand in the shadows pushing them along.

That girl can be uncannily sharp sometimes. Still, he said so himself, this guy's gonna be a tough nut to crack. I wonder what's brewing in that noggin of hers... Or, heh, maybe the big twist is that there's nothing brewing up there at all...

Dion was right. About the last part, at least. And all of you should have seen that coming. Mia had a wish, she made it, and that was as far as she got. She hadn't thought about how it was supposed to actually happen. Not to mention, even said wish was the result of her unwavering dedication to her Mia First policy...

That's right. While Abel and Sion both believed beyond a shadow of a doubt that Mia was benevolence incarnate, they were dead wrong. It obviously wasn't compassion that drove her to ask for the culprits to be spared. Mia was no saint, and she didn't

exactly have a big heart either. If anything, it was on the small side and had an embarrassing tendency to squawk. Like anyone else, she got angry when wronged, and right now, she was staring at a bunch of people who'd wronged her very badly. These were the very men whose actions had sent her to the guillotine the first time around. The last thing she wanted was to help them. Unlike Dion, however, she didn't suspect them of withholding information. So why, you're probably asking, did she make that request? Well, it's because there was one particular concern that kept gnawing at her, and said concern happened to be...

What if the same thing happens to them? I mean, I got a second chance at life. Is it possible for them to get a second chance too?

Having leapt through time herself, she couldn't deny that there was a chance other people might do so as well.

If so, then what are the conditions necessary for that to happen?

It wasn't clear, and since she didn't know for sure, she'd have to make assumptions based on her own experiences. For example, being killed on the same day at the same time in the same place might result in the same occurrence. Or perhaps it had something to do with dying by guillotine, or even dying with regrets.

If the people involved in this conspiracy are executed... could it happen to them too?

Thinking further ahead, if killing these men in the same fashion as she had been gave them a second chance at life, what would happen? Everything she'd done might be for naught. All the hard work she'd put in to change the course of history could very well be overturned.

N-No way. I am not *going back to the guillotine! I refuse!*

It was a sentiment that had stuck with her since her time leap, as vivid now as it had been then. However, she was aware that something else had bloomed within her — something stronger, which she felt even more passionately about.

That's not the only reason though... I don't want to go back... because I like it here. This timeline. This... now.

She looked around. At the people. At the scene. She tried to take it all in. It was a little overwhelming. There was her former enemy, Sion. There was his attendant, Keithwood. There was even the man who'd *personally* chopped off her head, Dion... Next to him, Abel, who'd been little more than a stranger... Tiona, whose help had allowed her to come this far... Chloe and Rafina...

Whereas once she'd had no one by her side but Anne and Ludwig, she was now surrounded by an entire circle of friends. It was as if she'd stepped into an alternate world — one that welcomed her with open arms. She liked it here. She liked it a lot more than she'd thought possible. And that gave her pause. She realized that, deep down, she was actually hoping that even Sion and Tiona would continue to stay by her side, and she wasn't sure how she felt about that.

D-Don't get the wrong idea, okay? I-It's not like I'm starting to like you people or anything! Just so we're clear!

Whenever Mia wasn't comfortable with her own emotions, she turned to her tried-and-true coping mechanism — a tsundere outburst in her own head.

Also, it should be mentioned that Dion was the one person for whom her opinion hadn't changed.

I-I'd rather not get any closer to him than necessary, to be honest...

There was one platform Mia stuck to, and it was Anti-Dionism.

"Abel, I know this will cause a great deal of trouble for you, but..." she said, trailing off hesitantly.

Abel showed her a weary smile and shook his head.

"It sure will. But it's fine. Without you, this crisis would never have been resolved so peacefully. You did your part. Now, let me do mine. I'll figure out a way to convince my father."

"But..." Sion gave Mia an inquisitive look. "If their lives are spared, what do you plan to do with them?"

It was a very good question — one that Mia had no answer for. She gave Sion a clueless look and blinked a few times.

"Hm... What *am* I going to do with them?"

Honestly, she didn't really care as long as they were left alive.

Imprison them in Remno and they'll probably get killed. Assassins or something. Imprison them in Sunkland and Remno will probably make a fuss. I guess I can take them with me to Tearmoon, but...

That was when Jem snickered.

"Oh man, are you kids seriously going to let us live? You sure are a bunch of regular saints, aren't you?"

Mia scowled. His grin almost made her want to kick him again.

This guy's starting to get under my skin.

Unlike Sion, her annoyance resulted in a flash of inspiration. A brilliantly devious plan dawned on her. She was going to get some payback, and she knew exactly how she would go about it!

“Yes we are. In fact, we’re so saintly that we’re going to leave you in the care of the Holy Lady herself. You can spend three whole years being lectured by Miss Rafina herself every single day. Now doesn’t that sound *marvelous*?”

The idea was well-received by Sion and Abel and both of them nodded at her. Objectively speaking, it was actually a decent proposal. Belluga was actually the least contentious place to put these people. Dion muttered something about letting them off too easy, but even he spoke with more humor than hostility.

The White Crows stared at Mia with baffled looks as though she’d just cracked a particularly dense joke. There was only one person whose reaction differed.

“F-Fuck off! You wouldn’t dare!”

Jem alone screamed in protest, his eyes wide and his teeth bared. His face seemed a little paler than before. His once vexing confidence was gone, replaced by a fast-growing panic. Mia mirrored the disdainful grin he’d worn back at him.

“My, how odd. Who was the one saying torture wasn’t going to work? And who was the one saying I can go ahead and do my worst? Wasn’t that you?”

Serves you right!

Despite Mia’s triumphant laugh, she did fully understand the true implications of her proposal. Never in her wildest dreams did she imagine that this decision of hers would shine the first beam of light into the dark closet of history and begin exposing the skeletons that lay hidden in its shadows.

And so, the series of disturbances that shook Remno began heading toward resolution. The cloud of uncertainty that hung over the fates of Lambert and Lynsha cleared as well, as the two siblings — along with all the central members of the revolutionary army — were granted clemency. The credit for this belonged to Ludwig who, having gone through his usual process of deducing Mia’s intentions and actually arriving at the correct conclusion, had eagerly made his way to the royal capital to request their pardon. He’d made the case that faulting Remno’s own people would, in a way, cast Sunkland in a more sympathetic light. Instead, focusing all the blame on Sunkland would allow them to extract more concessions during the negotiation. His logic had proven persuasive, and the King of Remno had taken his advice.

Thus concluded the incident, allowing the Mia brigade to return home. Upon arriving at the academy, Mia would face the despair that was midterms, but that woeful story will have to be told another time.

Part 1 Epilogue: The Tale of a Greedy Princess Who Always Placed Herself First

For three hundred years, the continent was blessed with peace and prosperity. This glorious era began with the emergence of a great many heroes who would leave their mark on history. There was Sion Sol Sunkland, who'd earned the name "The Libra King" for his virtuous reign, and his trusted retainer Keithwood. Offering guiding sermons of salvation to the populace was the Holy Lady, Rafina Orca Belluga, who dedicated her life to maintaining peace between nations. The Mianet — a mutual assistance network that spanned the entirety of the continent — was the brainchild of Forkroad & Co.'s head honcho, Chloe Forkroad. Whenever demonic cultists or large bandit brigades sought to sow chaos, Dion Alaia would arrive on the scene, his sword offering a swift and deadly rebuke to their ways.

And that wasn't all. There was also the hypercompetent Ludwig, who injected new vitality into Tearmoon through structural reform, along with the botanical innovator, Cyril Rudolvon, who developed a new strain of wheat before going on to discover a number of useful plant species. Still, Cyril's achievements wouldn't have been possible had he not studied under his sister, Tiona Rudolvon, whose early teachings equipped him with the knowledge to propel him into academia, and the list went on and on...

Amidst this dazzling pantheon of stars, however, was a moon who shone brighter than them all — the Empress of the mighty Tearmoon Empire, Mia Luna Tearmoon. Known widely as the Great Sage of the Empire and both adored and revered by all these great heroes, her documented accomplishments were nevertheless surprisingly few. Conspicuous was her absence in the credits of history. Rarely, if ever, did she take the stage herself. And yet, a well-known and frequently circulated morsel among historians was that, time and again, during the crucial moments when these

peerless figures left their mark in the annals of legend, Empress Mia would, without fail, be at their side.

Despite the cloak of mystery surrounding her, she was incredibly popular with the people of Tearmoon, appearing in numerous tales and myths that were told and retold. The most beloved of these was doubtlessly the story of "Rescuing the Prince," which recounted the time when her beloved prince had incurred the wrath of his kingly father. Hearing of her sweetheart's plight, Mia had raced to his rescue personally and, in an exhilarating display of her passionate side, snatched him from his homeland and brought him back to Tearmoon with her.

Afterwards, she'd wed the prince and formally welcomed him into the empire as her husband. At the time, this marriage drew the displeasure of much of the Tearmoon nobility. Why, they asked, had she taken an ousted prince as consort? The arrangement, they argued, accomplished nothing for the empire. Her response was swift and merciless. She and her subjects fought the dissidents tooth and nail in the arena of words until their victory was complete and absolute. Through their triumph, they let it be known that, while Princess Mia would not use her power in tyranny, when it came to those she loved, her fiery passion knew no bounds; she would employ every ounce of her influence and intellect to blaze her own path.

Her romances were great in degree but not number, and the love that blossomed in her youth would bloom faithfully her whole life. The adoration she enjoyed was doubtlessly due in part to this unwavering devotion of hers, which was repaid after she became empress; her husband faithfully supported her reign as she ruled over Tearmoon. As the empire was restored to its former glory, the pair would be gifted with eight children, greatly bolstering the longevity of the imperial lineage...

Mia looked up from the pages of the old history book she held.

"Eight children... sounds like a few too many..."

She was in the Saint-Noel library, and she was supposed to be meeting Chloe. While waiting, however, a history book on the shelves had caught her eye. Curious, she took it down and flipped it open, only to discover a biographical account of the Empress of Tearmoon, Mia Luna Tearmoon. Normally, this would be reason for bewilderment, but Mia — seasoned veteran of temporally

incongruous books — barely batted an eye. It wasn't her first encounter with such a thing.

"Oh, I guess this is just like that diary..."

Figuring it'd do for some casual reading, she idly thumbed through its contents, which eventually led to her previous comment.

"Seriously? Eight? I... I really got down to business, didn't I? Wow... Eight kids with Abel..."

"Hm? Hey, Mia, what are you doing here?"

"Gyaaaah!"

Her heart leapt into her throat. With nervous, jerky movements, she turned around to find Abel, who looked equally startled by her outburst.

"A-A-Abel? What are you doing here?"

"I was just looking something up. What's that you've got there? Reading something interesting?"

"Uhhh, this is... Wait."

It suddenly occurred to her that she might not want to show the book to Abel. However, when she glanced down at it, something was different. The passage she'd just read was nowhere to be found.

"How odd... It was just here a minute ago..." she muttered.

As she brought the book a little closer for examination, something began giving off a golden glow. Her eyes darted toward the source of the light to find words lifting themselves off the page. They floated upward before unraveling themselves like golden strings and melting away into the air.

"...What was that?"

"Mia?"

She quickly shook her head and blinked a few times before turning to Abel.

"Sorry. Don't mind me. It's nothing."

The account in the history book had disappeared. To Mia, it seemed like a sign that a nearly-finalized future had once again changed course for the unknown. It'd seemed like a very blissful future too, but just like that, it was gone.

It didn't upset her though. Instead, she shrugged.

"Oh well. I wasn't quite satisfied with that one anyway..."

After all, a future in which Abel couldn't return home and would never again see his family could hardly be said to be a perfectly happy future, and when it came to happiness, that just

wasn't good enough. Greedily pursuing pleasure was her style; Mia had and always would subscribe to the philosophy of Mia First.

"No more compromises. I worked too hard to get that damn guillotine out of my life. I want a future that satisfies me, and I will settle for nothing less."

The future remained uncertain, and no one yet knew where Mia's life would take her. One thing, however, would never change — her greed. She'd never met a compromise she liked; when it came to happiness, she wanted every last piece — for herself and all those she held dear...

This is the story of a slightly selfish princess who is given a second chance at life. She has sown the seeds of hope. What kind of future they grow into... is still anyone's guess.

Part 1 Fin

The sun had long since set, and darkness ruled the sky. Moonlight streamed through the window of an empty library, falling across the surface of a hefty wooden table. Resting atop it was a book, its last reader having forgotten to return it to its shelf. The culprit behind this hideous violation of bibliothecal norms was a rather familiar figure, since the neglected item was the history book that Mia had been reading earlier that day.

All of a sudden, the book flipped open. There was no wind, but its pages turned steadily. It began to give off a faint golden glow. Lucent lines appeared, twisting into words. They settled on the page, forming new and ominous passages recounting a dreadful history and the dark future to which it led... only for the text to start crumbling again before anyone could lay eyes on it. One by one, the glowing words unraveled and faded until only one line was left. It was the name of a young girl in whose veins flowed the blood of the Great Sage — the last princess of the Tearmoon Empire, Miabel Luna Tearmoon.

Like the last glimmer of hope at the bottom of that mythical box, it glowed and glowed, as though fighting to survive. Then, it — like all its brethren — unraveled and faded into the empty night.

Time continued its steady march, and our tale entered a new chapter.

To be continued in Volume 3

An Invitation to the Clair de Lune

A young girl made her way down the wide hallways of Saint-Noel Academy. She was in her mid-teens, and her long, gorgeous hair accentuated the air of pomp and confidence that exuded from her. With a proud smile, she walked unimpeded by nearby students who quickly shuffled aside and waited for her to pass. In a school filled with nobility from neighboring nations, she nevertheless behaved like someone who both deserved and expected deference from her peers. Her belief in her superiority was unwavering, and she had the lineage to back it up.

Esmeralda Etoile Greenmoon, the daughter of Duke Greenmoon — one of Tearmoon's "Four Dukes" — was born into wealth and power. The "Etoile" in her name — another word for star — was emblematic of her status. The Four Dukes were collectively referred to as Etoilers, which was a reference to the middle name they all shared. Those who bore the stellar designation were all part of the emperor's lineage and were in line to inherit the throne. Being of imperial blood afforded them vast power that, until the Empire's fall, arguably rivaled the actual royal families of smaller nations. It followed that Esmeralda would be a figure of significant prominence within the academy.

With confident strides, she made her way to Angelita's Abode, a salon often used to host tea parties. Inside she found it sparsely occupied. The only people present were a young boy enjoying some black tea at a table in the middle of the room with his attendant at his side.

"Ah, if it isn't Esmeralda arriving fashionably late to the scene." He raised his cup like a glass of wine. "A toast, then, to the audacity of our fair Etoiline, who dares keep me waiting. Were we not of equally stellar status, I'd hardly afford you the patience."

The boy was Sapphias Etoile Bluemoon. Like Esmeralda, his father was one of the Four Dukes. At sixteen, he was her equal in both age and pedigree, and they often ran into each other at parties and the like. The frequency of their encounters did not translate to

any form of friendship.

"Then again, this *is* the Clair de Lune. I suppose I can't really fault you for coming late to this particular gathering," he said.

The tea party they were currently attending was known as the Clair de Lune, first begun at Esmeralda's behest. It had been conceived as a recurring event where the empire's most prominent nobles would gather and, over tea and treats, reaffirm their mutual commitment to the glory of Tearmoon. Eligible participants had to be Etoilers or above. It was a party with only four invitees; three were children of the stellar dukes, Greenmoon, Bluemoon, and Redmoon — the daughter of Duke Yellowmoon wasn't slated to enroll in the academy until the spring — and the final attendee was the princess, Mia Luna Tearmoon. This was the first instance of the gathering to which Mia was there to invite.

"So? The capricious Miss Redmoon and her chronic unpunctuality notwithstanding, why is Her Highness still absent?"

Esmeralda didn't answer. She plopped herself down on a chair before huffing out a dissatisfied sigh. Then she launched into a disgruntled tirade.

"You want to know why? Let me tell you why, Sapphias. Princess Mia says she's not coming today. Just like that. Can you believe it? She's just not showing up! To our party!"

Sapphias discreetly rolled his eyes at this rant before asking, "Is that so? What lunacy has afflicted our dear princess, then?"

Again, she ignored him, instead reaching for the little tea cakes on the table between them. She shoved one into her mouth. Then two more. After a bout of furious chewing, she gulped it all down, let out a deep sigh, and finally spoke.

"Lunacy is right... According to her, she can't come because she's going in person to thank that Rudolvon girl for whatever she did."

"...Rudolvon? Oh, the outcount. Really? What in the moons could a country bumpkin like her have done to deserve personal recognition from the princess?"

"Apparently, she made a name for herself in Remno. Something about acting as Princess Mia's proxy and going with some commoner — Ludwig, I think? — to talk with the king..." Esmeralda said with a dark scowl.

"The diligent dispensing of reward and punishment for deeds done is of course necessary, but I can't say I appreciate the

dismissive attitude toward us. I could perhaps understand if it had been a secret date with the Sunkland prince or even a tea party with Miss Rafina, but…" opined Sapphias as he picked up one of the pastries on the table and popped it into his mouth. He munched for a while, appreciating its flaky texture, before smirking. "It would appear that Her Highness is suggesting she can make do just fine without us. That she deems the help of the Four Dukes… unnecessary. We're not being taken very seriously, are we, my dear Esmeralda?"

He shot her the kind of wicked grin often accompanied by hushed voices in shady taverns. Sadly, she had little taste for his attempt at villainy. Heck, she hadn't even been listening to begin with.

"Hmph! I'd planned this tea party just for her, too! And after all the trouble I went to, what do I get in return? A no show?" she complained, making no attempt to reply to Sapphias's statement. "Unacceptable! This is absolutely unacceptable! Why, Princess Mia? Why would you do this to me…"

She fumed, the fork in her hands shaking from how tightly she was gripping it.

"…Okay, how about you put that fork down before you bend the thing? The stuff here all belongs to Miss Rafina. I'd rather not have to explain to her why we're mutilating her utensils."

She kept fuming. He observed her for a few more seconds before letting out a sigh and rolling his eyes.

"This way please, Sir Emissary."

Under secret orders from Mia, Ludwig Hewitt had made his way to the king's castle in Remno. The final stroke was his responsibility; it was up to him to realize what Mia had been working toward all this time — an honest-to-god miracle. He was going to give the tumultuous story of this revolution a happy ending. He strode forward, his face set with determination.

Behind him, Tiona Rudolvon watched his advancing figure and sighed. Had things proceeded as expected, she'd be with Mia and the others right now on their return trip. Instead, Tiona had asked them to go without her, opting instead to accompany Ludwig on his journey to Remno. Her reason?

I was useless…

An excruciatingly acute awareness of her own powerlessness.

Motivated by a desire to repay Mia for her kindness, she'd joined her in her quest, swearing that she'd protect her at all costs. To her profound dismay, her resolve proved useless. When their cart was attacked, she couldn't do a thing to help. Afterward, they'd become separated, and she never did manage to accomplish anything of value. She didn't help Mia. Not even once.

Princess Mia accomplished so much. Meanwhile, I was just baggage. Useless baggage.

That was why she'd come with Ludwig. She didn't know what she could do, but she wanted — needed to do something. Otherwise, she'd have no choice but to go back... and the thought of returning as worthless as she'd left was simply too much to bear. However...

Is... Is there really anything I can do here?

The doubt had hit hard and fast, and she was already on the verge of regretting her decision. Ludwig stood opposite a group of Remno's top ministers. Behind them loomed the King of Remno, who looked down at them from his elevated throne. The scene would have been intimidating enough in its own right, but there was also a lot of shouting. Angry shouting.

"Full acquittal of all members of the revolutionary army? Do you take me for a fool?"

The king's rebuttal was swift and unforgiving, and his ministers wasted no time adding their own sycophantic voices to the assault, practically yelling over each other to make themselves heard.

"What rubbish! This is a waste of His Majesty's time!"

"That's right! This is a Remno matter! It's none of your business!"

"Do we speak to an emissary or a jester?"

"Someone get rid of him! This is no place for idiots and madmen!"

With the insults removed, the crux of their argument was actually valid. A foiled plan did not negate the attempt; these were still people who had sought to topple the current regime. Treason was no laughing matter, and an offense of this nature, irrespective of the actual damage done, would normally necessitate penalties of the highest order. Having all offenders as well as their families and kin put to death would hardly be excessive.

The situation was arguably worsened by the fact that the Holy Principality of Belluga intervening in the matter meant Remno

couldn't go after Sunkland's Wind Crows, who were the main culprits. Without any other viable targets, their rage was inevitably funneled toward the only people they could actually get their hands on — Lambert and his fellow leaders of the revolutionary army. Their current stance was only natural. To reverse such an instinctive conclusion would require an argument founded firmly on logic, but...

Ludwig hasn't said anything for a while.

Tiona knew why; it wouldn't matter even if he did. These people weren't here to listen. Logic held little sway over anger, and their opponents were fully under its influence. Ludwig could present a perfectly rational and preferable alternative, and it wouldn't change a thing. So he didn't; if speaking was futile, he simply wouldn't speak.

"A lighter sentence can perhaps be considered for this Lynsha girl who cooperated with Abel, but death is the only option for her brother and his accomplices."

The king's voice was stern and final. He showed no signs of heeding the words of an emissary who represented the wishes of his own son. Not only that, he grew ever more hostile as his anger shifted toward a new target.

"Also, though you claim to represent Tearmoon, are you not a vassal to the princess? I take it then that this drivel you spout is her invention. Hmph. I feel no need to listen to one who carries with him the stench of a fool."

The king's statement not only insulted Mia, but shifted the blame to her. That was not something Ludwig could bear to ignore. He glared at the king with the expression of one who'd finally surpassed the limits of their tolerance and was about to launch into a vehement rebuttal, only for Tiona to beat him to the punch.

"Princess Mia is *not* a fool!"

Tiona couldn't do anything. She knew that better than anyone. But for all her inability to act, she *saw*. She'd watched as Mia reached into the maw of despair and pulled out a miracle, every detail of the heroic effort burnt into her memory with vivid clarity. So she spoke, letting the scenes she'd witnessed flow freely from her heart to her lips.

"Her Highness... she heard about the troubles in Remno, and in an effort to save her classmate, Prince Abel, from the hardship that had befallen him, journeyed to this kingdom with only a handful of

companions. Once she arrived she investigated the situation, learned the details, and realized that those who incited the revolution were victims as well and deserved sympathy. She strove to resolve the conflict without a single life being lost, and has so far succeeded. Who else could have accomplished such a feat?"

"What nonsense..."

The king eyed Tiona with disdain. From where he sat — up on the throne of Remno — he saw little more than a girl whose only business should have been keeping her mouth shut. Instead, she flouted her position and vexed his ears with her worthless words and juvenile voice. Before the aged boulders of the Remno elite, she was but a roadside pebble, her appeal powerless against decades of fossilized thinking.

However, while a pebble could not shatter rock, it could create a ripple across water. And what was a ripple if not a small wave — the force of which could, at times, chip away even the sturdiest of cliffs? What Tiona changed was not the mind of the Remno king. Where she found resonance was in the hearts of those who'd been there with her. Those whose ears had been graced in person by the words of the Great Sage of the Empire, Mia Luna Tearmoon. Her ripple flowed through the room and struck a deep chord with the Adamantine Spear, Bernardo Virgil.

As a man of tradition and custom, Bernardo embodied the image of the old-fashioned warrior. He had a fondness for battlefield duels, detested trickery, and held the ideals of chivalry in high regard. Therefore, he felt he had to speak up. To be moved by a young girl's words and betray her with silence was nothing short of disgraceful.

"Your Majesty, please lend an ear to the young lady's words. A princess of tender age and foreign blood took it upon herself to find a peaceful solution to this incident. She exposed a nefarious plot that had been brewing within our borders, and she stopped the King's Sword from drawing the blood of the king's people. What she did was nothing less than spare us the tragedy of slaying our own kin."

Remno was a kingdom that revered martial prowess. It followed that when the kingdom's leading knight had something to say, even the king would listen.

"Bernardo... You..."

Hushed silence fell over the room at the king's hesitant

response, as though the collision between the ministers' anger and Tiona's outburst had spun into a great storm of emotion, and they all stood within its eye. Tension hit a peak, and everyone seemed to be holding their breath.

Everyone except Ludwig, who'd been waiting for this exact moment.

"Your Majesty, and Your Graces and Lordships, I implore you to listen to what I have to say... I implore you, for the sake of the Kingdom of Remno, to carefully consider what it is you should be doing at this point in time. To ask yourselves, what will best heal the wound this kingdom has sustained?" He pressed a finger to the bridge of his nose and, with dramatic flair, slightly adjusted the position of his glasses. "And to consider with me both the benefits of convicting your own people for their crimes... and not doing so."

And thus began Ludwig's meticulously and painstakingly planned counterattack, which would provide him with enough leverage to move the calcified boulders of tradition that weighed down the hearts of the king and his ministers.

The miraculous tale in Remno that began with the Great Sage of the Empire, Mia Luna Tearmoon, was now entering its final chapter.

While Ludwig and Tiona were working overtime trying to persuade the reigning authorities of Remno, the miracle maker — Mia herself — was also busy.

Busy melting into a puddle on her bed, of course. Upon returning to Saint-Noel, she'd promptly deflated from the exhausting journey and entered recovery mode. Which involved doing a lot of nothing. Only after lounging in bed for three whole days did a thought of any significance occur to her.

"Oh, right. I should probably thank everyone for everything they did." She sat up and scratched her head. "I could get each of them a present... but that sounds like a lot of work. Maybe I should just host a victory party or something..."

It definitely wasn't because a party would involve sweets, and she was craving said sweets. That definitely wasn't it. It would be wrong to suspect that all the stress she'd endured had worn her out, and she felt a desperate need to reward herself with an epic sugar soiree.

"That's right. This is to show my appreciation. It's a thank you party. Definitely a thank you party..."

After establishing a convincing pretext, she began pondering her next problem.

"Hosting a victory party is fine and all, but it's going to be hard to figure out a good menu. Hm..."

Her pondering led her to her friend and fellow princess, Rania of Perujin Agricultural Country, whom she viewed as an expert in all things sweet.

After listening to Mia recount her experiences in Remno, Rania first made it very clear that she was profoundly relieved to see her back safe and sound. Then she smiled.

"I think I might have the perfect thing."

"My, what is it?"

"It's actually something our country recently developed. It's still sort of experimental, but we call it the emperor melon, and it is simply *exquisite*..."

"Hm! More! Tell me more!"

"It's the product of extensive selective breeding aimed at maximizing its sugar content. It does have the downside of going bad really fast once it's mature... but when it's just ripe enough, mmmm... That moment when you put it in your mouth and it *melts into pure bliss*, it's like a little taste of heaven. It's sweet enough to give candy a run for its money, but it's also got this fresh melon aroma that fills your nose, along with just enough sourness to balance it out. It's a gift of nature crossed with human ingenuity and condensed into melon form."

"Ahh... Ahhhh... Splendid. That sounds absolutely splendid!"

Mia's expectations for this exquisite Perujin melon slammed into the roof, smashed through, and kept going up.

"But like I said, it's only good for a very short while. If Your Highness wishes to use it, it'll have to be eaten the same day it's brought in."

"I see. Which means once the date for the victory party is set, it can't be moved. Hm, that doesn't sound like that much of a problem..."

She was only inviting a handful of close friends, so their attendance could be confirmed beforehand. Once they found a date everyone was okay with, it should be fine. The only potential problem lay not with the people but the melon itself. In other words...

"Oh, but... If it's so good, I assume it must cost a fortune."

By now, Mia had become a compulsive penny pincher, and she'd long since internalized the fact that delicious things were also expensive things.

"Oh, don't worry about that. Consider it a gift in celebration of Your Highness's safe return," Rania said with a gentle smile that must have seemed nigh on angelic to Mia. "I'll tell my people it's for a tea party that's going to double as a showcase of our agricultural products."

Their meeting left Mia in extremely high spirits, feeling like all her problems had been solved.

"Mmmm, I can't wait to try that exquisite Perujin melon!"

Just as she began entertaining fantasies of biting into a big juicy slice of sugary delight, she received an invitation from Esmeralda to a tea party that was going to be attended by children of three of the Four Dukes. To her teeth-gnashing frustration, it was planned for the same day as her victory party.

"Argh, what a terrible coincidence..."

As a political nod to Perujin, Rania had been announced as the official host of the victory party, and Esmeralda was going to blow her top if she found out that Mia had turned down her invitation in favor of a party hosted by a princess from such a small country. At the same time, rescheduling was not an option.

It'll be difficult to postpone the victory party because of that exquisite melon, and Esmeralda's probably going to refuse to change her tea party's date out of sheer stubbornness...

Mia held her head in frustration.

"Ugh, why in the moons does Esmeralda have to make things so hard? What am I even supposed to do? I swear, I can't believe that girl sometimes!"

Mia's affection for Esmeralda fell by ten points.

"Hmm... Hmmmmmm..."

For some time, she groaned audibly as she pondered her options. Then it hit her.

"Oh, I know. Why don't I just change the premise? The purpose of the gathering can be to recognize Tiona's accomplishments and reward her efforts."

She quickly ran over to her desk and dug through the piles of reports that were strewn haphazardly across its surface.

"I'm pretty sure Ludwig sent me a letter about how Tiona did a

really good job...”

She still felt some lingering animosity toward the girl, but she was willing to put that aside for the sake of her victory party.

“After all, it’s the duty of rulers to confer appropriate reward on those who serve them well. This is the kind of reasoning Esmeralda will have to accept! Yes! What a brilliant idea!”

So, Mia hummed happily as she penned a letter to Esmeralda declining the invitation to her tea party.

Mia's Diary of Delights

The First Day of the Tenth Month

I had bread with lots of honey today. Honey from the Holy Principality of Belluga is the best. It was delicious.

The Tenth Day of the Tenth Month

I was going to have cake today... but Anne got angry at me. I didn't know Anne and the head chef were coll consp working together. Next time, I will have to eat cake secretly.

The Twenty-Fifth Day of the Tenth Month

I had ambermoon tomato stew today. I haven't had it in a long time. It was good, but the stew I had in the empire tasted better. I miss the head chef's food a little.

The Twenty-Fifth Day of the Eleventh Month

Wait a minute. I just reread my diary and my entries have somehow been devolving into food reports again. I swear, whenever I'm not paying attention, I end up writing about what I ate. Maybe this diary is cursed.

Anyway, moving on to other matters. I made a big discovery today. In the library I found a history book that had things about the *future* written in it. That fact itself wasn't really a big deal. I figured it was something like that other diary I had, so I wasn't too surprised. The problem was the stuff written in it. According to the book, I eventually marry Abel. I wonder how he's going to propose to me? I can hardly wait to find out.

In fact, I don't think I should just wait. I should be more proactive. But that means...

Anyway. Marriage. I started at the guillotine and I go all the way to finding a husband. What an epic journey. I deserve a pat on the back. In fact, I'll give myself one right now.

On top of that, we apparently will have eight children. That's more than enough to keep the Empire supplied with heirs for a long

time. We're definitely riding some sort of wave.

But still. Eight. That's... a lot. Maybe too many. It's going to be a pretty big undertaking. It said I'm going to be empress too. Honestly, it all sounds like so much work. Will somebody trade jobs with me?

Afterword

Greetings. I'm Nozomu Mochitsuki, and I'm glad we're meeting again.

I'd like to mention that this story is being regularly uploaded to the Internet in a serialized format, so every so often, tidbits from current affairs that left an impression on the author at the time of writing will make their way into the story. Within this second volume, the idea that "famine occurs not from an absolute lack of food but impediments in its distribution" is one of these tidbits.

I learned of this from a show that covered the Great Depression in the US and an article about an NGO that dealt with famine prevention strategies (this was a few years ago, so I'm not sure if it's still applicable today). If there was simply an absolute lack of food, then there would be nothing that could be done, but there is enough food in the world to keep every single person sufficiently fed. Famine occurs because some areas have an excess of food that ends up rotting instead of being transported to the areas in need. In other words, the problem both originates from and can be solved by the systems that people put in place. I felt like I was being presented with a question in a homework assignment.

...Tearmoon, you see, is a story that also offers the opportunity to learn a little about society and spark some thought about the world's people and ethics. That's why I highly recommend it to anyone who has kids or grandkids! It's perfect for their summer vacation book reports!

Now, like before, it's time to ask Princess Mia to give us the highlights of the third volume. Go ahead! You're up!

Mia: "...Actually, can't we just end the story here after two volumes? Something tells me I'll lead a much happier life that way."

Mochitsuki: "Don't be ridiculous. If Your Highness doesn't put in the work, your descendants are going to have it harder. This is no time to be slacking off. The whole reason behind—"

Mia: “Okay, okay, I get it. Third volume, right? Fine. Let’s see... Oh, is this the one where I beat up a massive shark?”

Mochitsuki: “No, that’s in a future volume.”

Mia: “Oh, then what about the time I win with more votes than Rafina in a popularity contest?”

Mochitsuki: “That *is* something that happens, but are you sure that’s the story you want to highlight? Just so you know, if Miss Rafina ends up hearing about it, then you’re on your own.”

Mia: “Hm? My, did I say something? Ohoho, how embarrassing. I seem to have the hardest time remembering things these days.”

So there you go. A new character is coming next volume! Something to look forward to!

Lastly, a few words of appreciation.

I’d like to thank the illustrator, Gilse, for continuing to provide such wonderful artwork. I’m forever grateful for your adorable depictions of Mia. In fact, I’ve had readers struggling with how adorable she is. They’ve said things like “This isn’t right. Mia’s just too cute...” (laugh) As the author, this pleases me to no end!

I’d also like to thank my editor, F, who has helped me in many ways, as well as my family and relatives who supported me along the way.

Finally, a big thank you to you, the readers, for picking up this book. I hope you’ve enjoyed the great adventures Mia has gone on. May we meet again in the next volume.

Hope you enjoyed Volume 2!
Gikeo

Bonus Short Story

Mia's Delicious Visitation

There is an artifact known as the Mia Pot.

Tucked away in a remote forest near the border of the Kingdom of Remno was a small settlement called Doni Village. One family of hunters in the village owned a pot that had been passed down for generations. They referred to it as the "pot of miracles," and there were a number of stories surrounding it.

The most famous of these claimed the pot once saved the people of the area from a cruel ruler. As the tale went, the ruler was once a gentle person, but when his whole family was nearly killed by poison he was left traumatized. Ever since that day his mild disposition had turned to cruelty. He stopped trusting others, subjected his people to heavy taxes, and sentenced those who couldn't pay to imprisonment and lashings.

One day, he went alone to the forest to hunt, bringing not even a single attendant with him due to his distrust of others. His solitary nature came back to bite him as he ended up lost in the forest. After much wandering, he happened upon Doni Village. The villagers treated him to an exquisite pot of hare stew so delectable that it thawed his frozen heart. He would go on to reverse both his behavior and his policies, and was remembered as a benevolent ruler.

The pot that had been used during his stay was, of course, the aforementioned Mia Pot. It was an expensive item, crafted through techniques unknown to Remno at the time, that had been gifted by the then-Princess of the Tearmoon Empire, Mia Luna Tearmoon.

Long ago, when the Kingdom of Remno had been gripped in the throes of an imminent revolution, Princess Mia had personally marched into the camp of the revolutionary army and resolved the situation without spilling a single drop of blood. The episode had become the stuff of legend within Remno, told and retold by its people.

When Princess Mia entered Remno to calm the unrest, there was a hunter whose hospitality she'd enjoyed. A similarly famous story told of the time she'd returned to the kingdom to bestow upon the hunter the gift of the pot in return for his generosity. Upon hearing the story for the first time, many would frown at this detail, wondering why she'd chosen a pot as a present. Those who knew Mia's ways, however, would without fail express understanding at her choice. Rather than a gift of money, she picked that which would best suit the recipient. When selecting gifts, the Great Sage of the Empire took into consideration not just the inherent qualities of the item gifted, but the sentiments of the person who would receive it.

The following, then, is the story of Mia and the exceptional pot she gave as a gift.

One day, in the White Night Dining Hall of the Whitemoon Palace, Mia was smacking her lips expectantly at a special menu prepared by the head chef.

"The main dish today shall be ambermoon tomato stew."

A soup dish was placed on the table before her. Steam rose from it, carrying the fragrance of fresh vegetables. The tartness of ambermoon tomatoes, mixed with the rich aroma of baked solanum tubers and the sweet fragrance of Perujin carrots, was further enhanced by a blend of spices, producing what could only be described as a revel for the senses.

"My! Mmhmhm, this is one of my favorite dishes. I've been thinking about this all day!"

She gazed covetously at the bowl of liquid joy and promptly spooned some into her mouth. A hot chunk of tuber rolled across her tongue, followed by a piece of stew-steeped carrot, and she went wide-eyed as her taste buds sprang to life.

"This... tastes even better than before..."

"Ohhh! So Your Highness has noticed."

The head chef beamed at Mia's comment. He proceeded to retreat back into the kitchen before reappearing with a trolley, atop which sat a large pot.

"As a matter of fact, the stew today was cooked using a new pot."

"Oh? A new pot, you say?"

Mia regarded the pot with curiosity.

“Indeed,” said the head chef with a pleased smile. “The heart of a stew begins in its pot. Truly, the quality of the vessel plays a significant role in determining the resulting flavor.”

Then, with all the bright-eyed enthusiasm of a child who’d received a new toy, he began humming as he explained the ins and outs of his new pot.

“This pot was made with state-of-the-art technology. Look here. Do you see the slight indentations on the surface? Such fine craftsmanship... It’s made from premium-quality materials that ensures an even transfer of heat throughout...”

“Hm, hm, I see. So those qualities you mention are what affect the taste... By the way, how much did this pot cost?”

“Cost? About a crescent gold, more or less...”

“My! That much? Well then. How glad I am to have learned that!” she exclaimed before eagerly requesting for Ludwig to see her as soon as possible.

Lately, Mia had been grappling with a certain problem. She’d been trying to think of a proper show of appreciation for Muzic of Doni Village, whose hospitality she’d enjoyed when she’d been caught up in the mayhem in Remno. The old hunter had been a veritable lifesaver, coming to her aid when she’d woken up completely lost after nearly drowning in a river. It went without saying that some sort of thank you gift was in order, but...

“I wonder what I should send him...”

That was where things got tricky. The simplest gift was money. It had a clear, defined value, and it was quick and easy to give. She could simply hand him a nice bag of cash as a reward and be done with it. There was one problem with this idea; its value was *too* defined. For example, if she gave him one gold coin, it would represent exactly one gold coin’s worth of appreciation. Considering this was the Princess of Tearmoon thanking the man who’d saved her life, one gold coin seemed more than a little miserly. If others were to find out, it would stain the Empire’s reputation. Worse still would be the scenario where Sion ended up giving ten gold, which would paint Mia as a stingy wretch.

She couldn’t just shower the man with money either. The guillotine may no longer be on her horizon, but Tearmoon’s finances were barely in better shape. There was absolutely no place for imprudent spending. All things considered, expressing her thanks in the form of money was very likely to end up costing her

more than she'd like.

Her best option, then, was a valuable object. Just like how exceptional knights received high-quality swords as rewards, and royally-appointed merchants who did well were given regal clothing, presenting people with expensive items as tokens of appreciation was a widespread practice. This method did still come with the problem of cost. Be it gems, clothes, or fancy swords, the wallet was going to suffer. Skimping on quality was too risky; the last thing she wanted was for it to be revealed that her supposedly stately present had fallen apart during transport or something. She'd never live down an incident like that. What it came down to was balance.

"The million-coin question, then, is how to obtain a high-quality item while keeping costs down..."

For three whole days, she pondered this problem. Then, in a flash of inspiration, she found her answer — in the head chef's pot! Rather, it *was* the pot!

"That's it! I just have to take something that's normally cheap and make it in an expensive fashion!"

Take, for example, a dress that's moderately expensive. Because it's moderately expensive, it should also be of moderately good quality. As a present, it'll likely be received with moderate enthusiasm which, in the grand scheme of things, isn't terribly impressive. "Moderate" lacks punch. However, what if you took the money that you would have spent on that dress, and bought a handkerchief with it instead? It's bound to be a handkerchief of the finest quality, and when you give it to someone as a present, what do you think their reaction will be? Doubtless, it'll be something along the lines of "What an *expensive* handkerchief!" or "Now that's a *quality* handkerchief!" In other words, using a moderate sum of money to acquire a normally inexpensive item at very high quality is how you create that premium feeling without breaking the bank.

In fact, when the head chef told Mia how much the pot had cost, the first thing she thought was, "My, you can make such delicious stew with something so cheap?" A gold coin was a lot of money for a regular person, but it paled in comparison to the cost of precious gems and premium dresses. She knew this for a fact, because she'd spent the past few days researching all sorts of potential gifts. Then the head chef showed up with a proud grin and the answer she'd been searching for: a premium pot made with

state-of-the-art technology.

"On top of that, the fact that it's a pot makes it a more meaningful present, too!"

In fact, considering the man's circumstances, giving him something like jewelry was exactly the kind of move that would make it seem like she'd put very little thought into her gift. A pot, meanwhile, would have great utility for a hunter like him. At last, Mia had happened upon the answer to her problem.

"Well then, there's no point in waiting around. I'll get Ludwig to send it immediately," she said, humming happily to herself as she fondly recalled the events in Doni Village. "I do hope he likes it... But, huh. The more I think about it, the more I miss that delicious hare stew... It was *so* good... I bet it'll taste even better if it's made with a premium pot... Mmph..."

She wiped away some drool. Then, an idea came to her.

"Huh, you know what..."

Her grin took on a devious air.

"My goodness. Come in, come in. That must have been quite the long journey," said the Remno chancellor, Dasayev Donovan, as he greeted the group stepping in through his door.

His genial smile didn't fully hide the apprehension in his expression. While his manor was as luxurious as one would expect of the residence of a Remno noble, he still couldn't help but worry it might be inadequate to properly welcome guests of such high standing. Walking at the forefront of the group was regality incarnate — the daughter of the Emperor of Tearmoon, who reigned over one of the two strongest nations on the continent. With a smile surprisingly devoid of arrogance, Mia Luna Tearmoon raised her skirt slightly in a respectful curtsy.

"Thank you very much for arranging to help us on such short notice, Lord Donovan."

I see. So this is the Great Sage of the Empire... The girl who changed Prince Abel...

A breath of admiration escaped his lips as he beheld the charming young princess.

"You're very welcome. Please, excuse my modest quarters and make yourselves at home. Shall I bring out sweets?"

"My! How thoughtful of you, Lord Donovan!"

Her face bloomed into a bright smile. Considering her status,

Donovan had no doubt she had more than her fill of sweets on a day-to-day basis, yet she still made sure to show earnest appreciation when they were offered as refreshment. That alone gave him a very good impression of the girl. To his added astonishment, she backed up her words with actions, leaving not a morsel of cake or a drop of tea behind. Throughout the whole process, she never once appeared to not enjoy it. This cemented his positive opinion of her.

Discretion and modesty, generally considered to be virtues, were ultimately situational. Using this very exchange as an example, had she practiced social modesty and avoided consuming the refreshments offered, it could be taken as a sign of suspicion. Maybe, it would be assumed, she was worried the food had been poisoned. If she wished to display trust, it would be necessary for her to take at least one bite. Presumably, she understood these social norms, which was why she chose to eat every last bit. How such a gesture would be received was dependent on the beholder, but Donovan found it endearing. He'd much rather see a hearty bite than a reserved nibble.

Had I a granddaughter... would she be like her? he thought, as a fond smile crept across his lips. He regarded her anew. *So I see.* This *is the girl who changed Prince Abel...*

Abel Remno was no stranger to him. As the chancellor, he had plenty of chances to see the boy. In fact, he'd been keeping a close eye on him. Though Abel seemed to be made of kinder stuff than the violent First Prince, Gain, his indecisiveness made the thought of leaving the kingdom in his care more than a little worrisome. That had always been Donovan's opinion of the Second Prince — a boy who fell short of his brother in leadership, decisiveness, martial prowess, and pretty much every other aspect in the makings of a ruler.

But... he's changed. I still remember it as if it were yesterday... The way he carried himself on the battlefield, and the deftness with which he pacified the town's unrest after rescuing me... The scrawny, unassertive child I once knew is now a veritable lion of a boy.

Though he knew not what transpired in Saint-Noel Academy to promote such transformative growth in Abel, it wasn't hard to imagine that the girl before him was closely involved.

Now then. Let us find out what business a girl like her has with the likes of me.

Dasayev Donovan took a deep breath to compose himself, and spoke.

"Please forgive my tardiness. I should have expressed my gratitude the day I was rescued. Thank you, for bothering with this old bag of bones... and more importantly, for preventing the bloodshed that the people might have otherwise suffered," said the old count in a tone of deep sincerity.

Mia gently shook her head.

"I shall accept your gratitude, but only on behalf of those who are more deserving. It was a concerted effort by everyone — including yourself, Lord Donovan, who I believe contributed a great deal to the cleanup afterwards."

Discretion and modesty, in Mia's opinion, were extremely important. The elderly count before her was the chancellor of Remno, whom even the Holy Lady, Rafina, recognized as a man of benevolence and integrity. She only stood to benefit from getting on his good side.

Abel's brother seems to hate me for some reason, and I have no idea if his sisters or parents will like me, so if I want a happy married life with Abel, I'm going to need friends in Remno!

In accordance with her unwavering Mia Firstness, she promptly engaged in extreme modesty signaling, dodging and deflecting all compliments sent her way to demonstrate her profound social discretion and restraint. Never once did it occur to her that the empty plate in front of her, devoid of its baked contents, somewhat marred the effect.

"In fact, that's why I've come back to Remno, so I can thank all the people who lent me their strength. There is one person in particular for whom I have a present I'd like to deliver in person."

"A present to be delivered in person?"

Donovan's eyes went wide.

"Of course." She nodded firmly. "This person saved my life."

The conversation between Donovan and Mia drew a sigh of wonder from Ludwig, who'd been watching them from the sidelines.

As always, Her Highness is a marvel to behold.

Mia had prepared a gift and carried it herself on their journey here. It was a small gesture, but one that renewed his faith in her.

Normally, someone in her position would simply hand the gift to a courier and send them off with her regards. She didn't do that.

She is the princess of a vast Empire, yet she is earnest in her appreciation and is willing to express it with her own two hands. That alone is sure to influence Lord Donovan's opinion of her.

It wasn't much. The gift itself was unchanged. The most she accomplished was to add candor to its message. Politics, however, were not practiced through emotions, and it was a faux-pas to insert one's feelings into diplomatic matters. It was imperative that nations grounded their decisions in the bedrock of logic.

How she was viewed by a minor foreign chancellor should be irrelevant. So long as negotiations between nations proceeded calmly and rationally, neither party should be unduly concerned with the feelings of the other.

...Or at least, that would be the outlook of a hardline rationalist. But the reality was different. You could preach the virtues of reasoned judgment in politics all you wanted, but at the end of the day, it was people behind those politics — people who were at the mercy of their hearts. Politicians had their biases, and whether they were friendly with or detested someone was clearly going to influence their decision making.

Such influences sometimes carried little weight. If a prince was fond of a princess, but her nation was on the brink of collapse, he couldn't just send her a bunch of troops unless there was something to gain. Similarly, if her nation was suffering from famine, passion alone could not permit him to offer food without compensation.

But that didn't mean it made no difference at all. It was like shopping; if the same product were being sold by multiple merchants at the same price and quality, you'd purchase it from the merchant with whom you have an established relationship. If anything, you might even be willing to pay a little more to buy from the person you liked. These were the kind of tiny differences that, though they carried little weight individually, could stack up until they were heavy enough to tip the scales.

Her Highness is truly a paragon of diligence. Not only is she ensuring that those who helped her are repaid, she's using this as a networking opportunity to strengthen the bonds between Tearmoon and Remno going forward. The lengths to which she goes for her nation is a marvel to behold!

Ludwig found himself moved almost to tears by the Great Sage

who was so wise in her service to the Empire. While he was busy basking in his ever-escalating fantasies, Mia continued her explanation.

"He's a hunter named Muzic from a place called Doni Village, and I very much wish to hand this present to him myself. Would it be too much to ask for a guide?"

"Doni Village... The name does not ring a bell..."

"It's not far from the town where we rescued you. There's a village of hunters in the nearby forest."

"I see. If it's in that area, then... Asking the locals would be best. Perhaps someone from the Senia garrison could assist you..." Donovan got up and walked over to a cabinet from which he retrieved a piece of parchment.

"If you'll give me a moment, I'll gladly write you a letter of introduction to the mayor of Senia. I'll also have someone from my household accompany you as a guide on the way there."

"You have my gratitude, Lord Donovan," Mia said with a cheerful smile.

Things continued on smoothly after that, and Mia was soon enjoying the gentle sway of a well-sprung carriage, Dasayev Dononvan's letter of introduction held firmly in her hand.

Thinking back on it, asking the chancellor for help was definitely the correct choice... thought Ludwig. *Considering the King of Remno's unfavorable opinion of Her Highness, going to him directly would have made things far more difficult.*

He glanced at Mia, who was gazing cheerfully at the passing scenery. Her blitheness proved infectious, and he felt his own mood improving.

It's as if a heavy burden has been lifted from her shoulders. She must have been deeply troubled by having left such a debt unpaid, even though few, if any, would be upset or even surprised had she — the princess of a great nation — simply forgotten to acknowledge an act of kindness from a commoner... It warms my heart to know that Her Highness undoubtedly has the makings of a benevolent ruler.

He put his fingers to the bridge of his nose, as though adjusting his glasses, and sniffled a little.

...Those of you who happened to bring a knife may proceed with the cutting, because the irony is so thick that you can all have a piece for yourselves.

When they finally arrived at Doni Village, the Princess Guard was left speechless at the sight.

"You're telling me... she stayed in a place like this with Prince Sion?"

The soldiers traded astonished whispers and flabbergasted expressions. You couldn't blame them. Doni Village was a tiny settlement, and there was nothing about the place that suggested it would be even remotely suited to hosting royalty. Those familiar with Mia's character, such as Anne and Ludwig, might have expected as much, but the guards couldn't help but stare in disbelief. Mia regarded the sea of bewildered gazes and giggled with glee.

"Oh, stop it with those looks. The village might be small, but I'll have you know that it's quite pleasant, and it's graced by all sorts of wonders from the forest."

By which she meant hares. Or rather, what hares become after they've been left to stew in a pot for a few hours.

Mia made a beeline for Muzic's shack. As she walked up to the door, it occurred to her that he might be out hunting, but her concern was quickly dispelled when the old hunter appeared at her call.

"Well, bugger my bowstrings, if it ain't the little lady." He grinned at his unexpected guest. "Good to know you found your friends."

"I certainly did, and it's all thanks to the generous help you offered. In fact, I owe you my life, and you must allow me to express my gratitude." She offered him a warm smile and graciously bowed her head. "You see, I'm actually..."

She proceeded to disclose her true identity.

"Huuuuh, that so? I got word from your little buddy too. Never woulda thought you were a pair of royal types. Prince and princess, huh."

Apparently, Sion was one step ahead of her, having already dispatched an envoy.

He sure is diligent when it comes to these things. It looks like he beat me to the punch.

She grudgingly tipped her mental hat to Sion. Then she produced her present.

"I've come bearing a gift. Consider it a token of my appreciation."

Muzic held up his hands and took a step back.

"Nah, don't bother. I don't need no gifts. I helped you 'cause I wanted to. That's all. The prince offered me something too, and I refused him."

His gesture caused the accompanying Remno guide to draw in a sharp breath — and for good reason. The Princess of Tearmoon had gone to the trouble of making a personal visit to give him his gift, and he just responded with the equivalent of "Meh, no thanks." It was an outrageous affront, and no one there would have been the least bit surprised if Mia had, in a fit of anger, shouted, "Off with his head!"

She didn't though. There wasn't a single sign of anger on her face. Instead she frowned in gentle disappointment.

"My, that's rather unfortunate. I was hoping to ask you to use the pot I brought to make some more of that delicious hare stew," she said, crestfallen.

Everyone traded puzzled glances, wondering what the heck the deal with this stew was. Everyone except Muzic, who roared with laughter.

"Seriously? You came all this way just for a pot of hare stew?"

"I certainly did. I heard that cooking with this pot makes food even tastier, so I thought I simply must give it a try," she said as she, in a most unassuming fashion, pulled the pot out of its pouch. "Oh, I've been looking forward to this so very much."

"Well now. Gotta say, that's a real fancy pot."

"Yes, it was crafted by the Empire's finest artisans using the latest pot-making know-how. Apparently, it's really good at letting heat through, and it can really work some magic when you're stewing meat and stuff," she said, proudly showing off the pot as though she'd designed it herself. "Might I trouble you, then, to give it a go? Whatever you make, I'll pay for my share, of course. So by all means, please make some of that stew... And while you're at it, actually, could I trouble you to pick some *edible* mushrooms? Ones that are easy to cook preferably. I'd love to have some mushrooms too... Can you stew mushrooms?"

"Well yeah, sure, you can make mushroom stew... but didn't I tell you to stay away from the damn things?"

Ludwig watched the exchange between Mia and Muzic from the sidelines.

Truly, Her Highness is a marvel to behold.

He'd been having these same thoughts so often on this journey that he was starting to repeat himself, even in his head. In Ludwig Land, inflation had become the norm.

Despite the recipient turning down his reward, she nevertheless managed to place the gift in his hands. And it all felt so natural... To remove any lingering reservations, she refocused the issue on what was supposedly her own selfish desire for fine foods, making it seem like he'd be doing her a favor by accepting her gift...

It was a masterful display of social maneuvering. He led by saying he hadn't helped her for personal gain. She countered with the claim that he'd be doing her a favor. Faced with his tactically impenetrable modesty, she simply turned the tables. She wanted to eat, and she was the one doing the asking. The pot wasn't a gift; it was a tool to fulfill her request. It was a brilliant checkmate, and she'd come up with it on the spot.

Now all that was being asked of him was to provide a single meal. Since she was a guest from afar, propriety alone would require him to provide such, and the burden on him would be minimal so long as there was no famine. It was like witnessing art in motion — a calculated sequence devised and carried out to perfection. For the next little while, Ludwig's head was filled with little more than admiration for Mia.

It's beating a dead horse at this point, but obviously, Mia wasn't doing any social maneuvering. There was no calculating, no battle-of-wits subtext to their exchange. She'd meant every word she'd said. Literally. She was honestly just craving delicious hare stew. Which was fine, really. Nothing wrong with a bit of gluttony from time to time. Plus, good food was the basis for a good life. Why question a girl's pursuit of happiness?

And happiness she found, with plenty to go around. Everyone present, from Ludwig and Anne to the princess guard and her Remno guide... Everyone who had some of that delicious stew found themselves sharing in an air of warm mirth and laughter. A good meal was a source of bliss, and a few sips were enough — at least for a little while — to free them from their worries.

"I'll leave that pot in your care, Muzic. Should I have the

chance to visit again, I'll be looking forward to another bowl of stew," said Mia as she gave the old hunter a sprightly wave of goodbye.

"You betcha. Come again any time. I'll treat you to the best pot o' stew you've ever had."

Muzic waved back and smiled as though he were sending off his own granddaughter.

Mia departed the village, unsure if she'd ever return. Her future was uncertain, and the path ahead was still shrouded in mist. So, she sowed seeds, scattering them to the winds of fate as she proceeded. One day, they would bloom, and maybe — just maybe — she would reap the fruits they bore.

Tearmoon's revolution is gone now... but I still need a backup plan in case something happens. Doni Village is a tiny place in the middle of a forest, which makes it perfect for times when I need to go into hiding. Plus, as long as they have that pot, I'll have all sorts of delicious food to eat, so I won't have to worry about going hungry.

The timid always sought refuge; no coward would go without a safehouse prepared. It hadn't been long since her diary had disappeared, and Mia was still carefully planning out her next steps. Knowing her, though, the diligence was unlikely to last. Pretty soon, she'd probably start slacking off...

Thus concluded Mia's visit of appreciation, during which everyone had a good time. Everyone, that is, except for the hares that were eaten. They didn't have a very good time.

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by Nozomu Mochitsuki

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